

# “Amongst the Most Desirable Reading”: Advertising and the Fetters of the Newspaper Press in Britain, c. 1848–1914

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What is the difference between advertising and news? This article examines the rise of this question and its precarious resolution in the formative era of modern advertising and press commercialization in Britain, c. 1848–1914, with particular attention to legal powers mobilized in the process.

This article traces a dialectical process, which began with the midcentury campaign to repeal taxes on the press, one of which was the advertisement duty. The campaign framed advertising as a communication of essential information. Its success gave full rein to advertising in the newspaper press, but also triggered a readjustment: Newspaper owners soon faced a threat to their effective control of the medium; their proprietary power to differentiate advertising from their self-proclaimed business – news – was put to

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the test. Owners' responses established a hierarchic distinction between news and advertising, along an informational metric: advertising was framed as an inferior kind of information, more biased than news. The hierarchy became embedded as common sense to the point that the process of historical creation has been forgotten; yet, it asserted a difference between news and advertisements, which had little to hang on in theory and practice, giving rise to challenges that still resonate today.

### Advertising and News

In October 1883, a number of British newspapers reported a case of patent medicine forgery:

PROSECUTION BY THE SUSSEX DRUG COMPANY. – At the West Ham Police-court, Frederick William Stubbs. . . was charged on a warrant for that he, with intent to defraud the Sussex Drug Company, did unlawfully and falsely apply a certain trade mark to a bottle in which Cobden pills were intended to be sold.—Mr. Charles Lamb, of Brighton, prosecuted; Mr. Shakespeare Smith defended.—Mr. Lamb said his clients resided at Brighton, and carried out business as the Sussex Drug Company. One of their leading articles was a pill invented by Mr. R. Cobden Cox, called 'Cobden's Quinine and Phosphorus Pills,' on which £10,000 had been expended in advertising and establishing the proprietary rights, so that it was very important that the article should be protected. In June last, the prisoner went to Mr. Little, carrying on business at Stratford, and, producing a copper plate relating to Cobden pills, he asked for a number of labels to be struck off. He. . . stated that he was one of Mr. Cobden's agents. The labels were printed. . . When prisoner was arrested he had. . . bottles on which the trade mark of Cobden's pills was forged. . . as the prisoner. . . had offered to hand over all. . . blocks, plates, and moulds. . . the Company were willing to withdraw the prosecution. . .<sup>1</sup>

In a following circular of the Newspaper Society, intended for newspaper owners and editors, a warning appeared that the report was not news, but an advertisement.<sup>2</sup> Was it? How could one tell the difference? What marked a publication as an advertisement rather than news? These questions became urgent in the formative era of modern advertising and press commercialization in Britain, which span the second half of the long nineteenth century. In midcentury, advertising was still deeply suspected by businesses themselves; by the turn of the twentieth century it

1. *Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, October 9, 1883, 3. Others included *Hull Packet*, October 12, 1883, 8; *Leeds Mercury*, October 10, 1883, 5; and *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, October 12, 1883, 6.

2. Newspaper Society circular, December 1883, 14 (hereafter NSC). On the Society, see Part 2.

was the sine qua non of any rational business strategy, and a rising profession. Advertisements became ubiquitous scenery, encountered by persons in and outside urban centers. Manufacturers and service suppliers, as distinct from wholesalers and retailers, came to dominate advertising and address consumers directly. Advertising media diversified and grew in numbers and capital investment. Important among media was the newspaper press, which commercialized and expanded in the same years.<sup>3</sup> As advertising and newspapers became increasingly imbricated, the question of differentiation came to the foreground.

This article traces the rise of the dilemma of differentiating ads from news, and the answers provided by participants who could back their position with legal powers wielded in public and private contexts. It begins in 1848, when the campaign to repeal taxes on newspapers, one of which was the advertisement duty, gained momentum in a political atmosphere conducive to reformist agendas and free trade. The campaign consciously framed advertising as a communication of essential information. Its successful end gave full rein to advertising in the newspaper press, but also triggered a dialectical movement to readjust the framing. Newspaper owners soon faced advertisers' threat to their effective control of the medium. Their proprietary power to differentiate ads from their self-proclaimed business—news—and thus limit advertisers, was put to the test. They proceeded by developing conceptualizations of advertising that implied a hierarchic distinction between news and advertisements. The power struggle was at its zenith between the 1880s and World War 1.

The overall process framed advertising as an informational category, but of a lesser order, different from and inferior to—because more biased than—news. The process reflected contradictory pulls. On the one hand, the persistent informational focus legitimized advertising, which was necessary to sustain newspapers without political patronage. On the other hand, the same focus elevated news over advertising, and kept news as the newspaper press's main public service. The informational hierarchy assumed the status of common sense, yet, as shown throughout, had little to hang on

3. For reviews of developments in advertising see, for example, Peter Gurney, *The Making of Consumer Culture in Modern Britain* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), ch. 4; Terry R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History* (London: Heinemann, 1982); E. S. Turner, *The Shocking History of Advertising* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Blanche B. Elliott, *A History of English Advertising* (London: London Business Publications & B. T. Batsford, 1962); W. Hamish Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850–1914* (London: Macmillan, 1981), ch. 10; Roy Church, "Advertising Consumer Goods in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Reinterpretations," *Economic History Review* 53 (2000): 621–45; and Raymond Williams, "Advertising: The Magic System," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980): 170–95. The history of newspapers is recounted subsequently in this article.

in theory and in practice. At once powerful and precarious, this framing has given rise to challenges that still trouble debates about communication media, as observed in conclusion.

The analysis emphasizes underexplored elements in media and advertising history. One is the framing of advertising itself. Scholarship has tended to consider the relationship between advertising and the newspaper press from the perspective of the latter, privileged as a democratic institution, at least in potential, and to examine how it changed with the rise of advertising. An ongoing debate has addressed advertising's role in turning the press from a potentially critical power in democracies, to a docile one. Jürgen Habermas memorably turned his fall-of-the-public-sphere narrative on the role of advertising in the press's financial structure.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to affirmative interpretations of newspapers' liberation from political control, a line of critical inquiry has shown that the radical press in Britain was brought to a halt with the rising power of advertisers, and has argued for the depoliticization of newspapers after midcentury.<sup>5</sup> The effect was a pull toward the middle class; thus, James Curran and Jean Seaton describe the power of advertising as a new licensing system, which replaced traditional political control.<sup>6</sup> This article examines how newspapers struggled with advertisers' power, while attending to a second question: what happened to the status of advertising under the pressure of newspapers' responses? Just as advertising did not simply enable the growth of newspapers without political patronage, but also curbed their political edge, so newspapers did not simply provide an expansive medium for advertisements, but also undermined advertisers' claims to serious attention. By the end of the period examined here, press advertising had not only been mainstreamed in cultural and economic life, it had also been inferiorized. The inferiorization of advertising as biased information has not been examined as a

4. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

5. For example, James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting, and New Media in Britain*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge, 2003); Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004); and Jean Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998). Depoliticization refers to a reduction in political content, and to a depoliticized approach to political news, which emphasizes personal aspects of political figures. Chalaby, *Invention of Journalism*, 76–78.

6. Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*. See also discussion of the commercialization and professionalization of the press below, note 57. Curran has continued to examine the disproportional advertising revenue and hence success of conservative newspapers, and a general pull toward the young middle class in journalism. James Curran, "The Impact of Advertising on the British Mass Media," *Media, Culture and Society* 3 (1981): 43–69.

historical occurrence; instead, it has been treated as axiomatic, an inherent characterization. This article recovers the history of this view; both the evaluation of advertising on an informational metric, and its eventual placement low on that metric, were part of codependent processes of consumer market expansion and press commercialization in the era examined here, and reflected the hopes, needs, and limitations that they entailed.

Another emphasis is on the role of legal powers in the historical process. To recover the rise of the dilemma of differentiating advertisements from news, and its contingent resolutions, the analysis attends to legal settings that were not exclusively state oriented, and encompassed not only legislative reform but also uses of private property rights, courts but also contracts; it takes a wide view of law beyond the state, and highlights the production of meanings that occurred in interactions among public and private sites of legal action. Both stages of the historical process—advertising’s elevation with the repeal of taxes, and a readjustment of its status when newspapers were threatened—depended on legal powers mobilized to give practical implications and cultural prevalence to specific interpretations of advertising. The legislative process that removed the advertisement duty was attended by a theory of advertising as essential information, which it endorsed, and which became the prevalent justification for advertising’s uninhibited expansion. In the years following, newspaper owners did not mobilize legislation, but they did use their proprietary powers to readjust that prevalent view. They created a normative universe consisting of recommended policies for the trade; articulations of the roles of journalists, editors, and departments; flaggings of violations; and examinations and channelling of everyday contractual relations with advertisers and agencies, often in dialogue with court cases. This universe bespoke the superiority of news over advertising. While this article shows that the hierarchy was deeply troubled for both conceptual and structural reasons, it was still the case that legal categories mattered. Legal ownership of a newspaper and the attendant ability of owners to claim that news, but not advertisements, were their core service, and to give that claim practical meaning, were significant enough to retain in cultural understandings the separation between advertising and news, and to establish a hierarchy. The uses of law in the history of British advertising have been neglected. This article examines one part of this cultural legal history.

## **1. Advertising Unleashed**

### *The Taxes on Knowledge*

In 1919, Thomas Russell, who had been the advertising manager of the *Times* and founder of the Incorporated Society of Advertisement

Consultants (1910), taught the first academic course on advertising in Britain at the London School of Economics.<sup>7</sup> In his second lecture, he traced the origins of the verb *to advertise* “in its limited commercial sense.” The historical use referred simply to making something known or attracting attention. The old use lingered on, yet Russell thought it was “easy to see how advertising—that is, giving notice of—a reward, or of anything else, being extended to announcements of goods for sale, might push the more general use of the word. . . aside, and give it the specialized meaning which survives.”<sup>8</sup> The term *advertising* had certainly assumed a “commercial sense” by the time of Russell’s lectures, but in the years preceding, its meaning was an open question. When applied to newspapers, the “commercial sense” was a particularly challenging question. Newspapers had become a fully commercial, capital-heavy enterprise. Their pages included a variety of material that was, therefore, all, in one sense or another, commercial. What defined advertising in that environment? The campaign against the “taxes on knowledge,” which opened up the race of commercialization, was a central legal arena in which the “commercial sense” of advertising was elaborated. Its terms of art set the stage for the struggle of capitalist owners themselves with the problematic of advertising’s boundaries.

The “taxes on knowledge” banner referred to the newspaper stamp duty, paper duty, and advertisement duty. It was a radical cry against keeping the multitude in the dark by making newspapers too expensive, thus securing an antidemocratic political status quo. The campaign against the taxes saw one peak in the 1830s, and a second in midcentury; the taxes were finally repealed between 1853 and 1861.<sup>9</sup> Accounts of the campaign straddle the history of the newspaper press, and that of politics and fiscal policy.<sup>10</sup> In the history of British advertising, the repeal of the advertisement duty is typically noted together with the repeal of other taxes as a functional

7. Advertising instruction was available earlier through initiatives such as the Practical Correspondence College, the Dixon Institute of Salesmanship, or Page-Davis Co. Advertising Instruction. See course offerings, John Johnson Collection, Publicity Boxes 5–6, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

8. Thomas Russell, *Commercial Advertising* (London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1919), 48 n. 1. For the lingering old use, see, for example, the first legal treatise on advertising law, T. Artemus Jones, *The Law Relating to Advertisements* (London: Butterworth, 1906).

9. The advertisement duty in 1853, the stamp duty on newspapers in 1855, the paper duty in 1861.

10. For example, Martin Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain: The End of the ‘Taxes on Knowledge,’ 1849–1869* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); and Lynne Oats, “The Abolition of the Taxes on Knowledge,” in *Studies in the History of Tax Law*, vol. 2, ed. John Tiley (Oxford: Hart, 2007), 287–306. See additional examples in Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*, 1–2.

turning point that opened up competition in the newspaper market, and led to a sharp rise in newspaper advertising and an increasingly powerful stand of advertisers. The cultural significance of the campaign in conceptualizing advertising, however, has been overlooked.<sup>11</sup> Before turning to examine it in the next section, I briefly recount the background; it contextualizes the campaign, and clarifies the concerns that have attracted the attention of historians, and deflected it from the conceptualization of advertising.

The taxes were legislated in the Stamp Act of 1712. The Act was a source of revenue, but also, according to a common Victorian interpretation, another means of political control of the newspaper press, fewer than 20 years after prepublication censorship ended.<sup>12</sup> Efforts to remove the taxes animated the early Victorian era; best known are the violent unstamped papers campaign of the 1830s. The government reformed the tax regime in 1836 in a manner that Martin Hewitt describes as partly responsive to moderate radicalism, yet retaining controls on the popular press. The advertisement duty was reduced from 3s 6d to 1s 6d per advertisement, and remained at that level until midcentury.<sup>13</sup>

11. The reading of taxes together in functional terms has typified histories coming from different schools and methodologies; for example, Nevett, *Advertising in Britain*, 67; and Sara Thornton, *Advertising, Subjectivity and the Nineteenth Century Novel: Dickens, Balzac and the Language of the Walls* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4.

12. For the interpretation of taxes as political inhibitions among Victorian constitutional historians see, for example, Thomas Erskine May, *The Constitutional History of England*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1865); and Philip Vernon Smith, *History of the English Institutions* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1874). For debates in current historiography between politics and finance needs as the driving motivation, see Oats, “Abolition of the Taxes on Knowledge.” The 1830s campaign was rooted in seventeenth and eighteenth century traditions that associated civil liberties with freedom of the press from direct state control. Aled Jones, *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1996), 12.

13. Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*, ch. 1. Collet Dobson Collet, one of the campaign’s leaders, explained the quiet after 1836 as an effect of the consolidation of the entire press industry under the supervision of the Commissioners of Stamps, which protected a monopolist trade. Collect Dobson Collet, *The History of the Taxes on Knowledge: Their Origin and Repeal*, vol. 1 (London: Fisher Unwin, 1899), 62–63. Even after reduction, the taxes functioned as anticompetitive entry limitations to newspaper publishing; the advertisement duty was not imposed at the source but on newspapers, and therefore put pressure directly on those strained for cash. The 1836 reform also mounted entry limitations in other ways, such as increased penalties for possession of unstamped papers, greater powers of confiscation of printing presses, and augmented securities. Meanwhile, stamp-paying papers enjoyed postal privileges. The greatest benefactor was the *Times*; as Hewitt observes, much of the hostility that fuelled the midcentury campaign was against its monopolist power. Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*.

The campaign was rekindled in 1848. The year had seen revolutions across Europe, which sparked fears in Britain that Chartists would unleash violence at home. Hysteria receded when Britain remained stable, but the danger that 1848 represented was not overlooked. Instead, it encouraged a reformist agenda both outside of and in government. From outside, a radical revival was pressing for financial and electoral reform, and enjoyed receptiveness as a more palatable alternative to the Chartist threat to social order. From within, the Whig Prime Minister John Russell, who was then premiering a weak government, endorsed the view that reforms responsive to social demands were necessary; indeed, in his view these were the historical reason for Britain's escape from revolution, and the only guarantees against the dangers of a full democracy.<sup>14</sup> In that context, Hewitt describes the encouragement that campaigners found in recent reforms, among them the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws and removal of duty on glass. Campaigners also built on the invocation of "taxes on knowledge" as a cross-class political agenda after the fragmentation of Chartism. The campaign involved a number of organizations, including the Newspaper Stamp Abolition Committee (NSAC), a reorganization of dismantled Chartist movements, headed by metropolitan radicals who had been involved in the 1830s campaigns. NSAC created a national agitation, and was supported significantly by the *Daily News* and a few radical provincial papers. In Parliament, Anti Corn Law League veterans, John Bright, Thomas Milner Gibson, and Richard Cobden, headed the campaign, supported by a diverse group in the Commons. The London Committee for Obtaining the Repeal of the Advertisement Duty, supported by a number of newspaper editors and owners, joined NSAC.

The historical background that encouraged campaigners also explains the challenges that they faced. The shift to free trade left the government dependent on taxes for revenue while the protectionist threat to prove free trade a mistake and reinstate the Corn Laws was still looming. The government was guarding against deficit in the face of what Jonathan Parry describes as an unofficial radical-protectionist combination against fiscal policy. Doing so and also responding to agitation was not an easy path to navigate.<sup>15</sup> The campaign not only drew on key concerns of its time—both democratic consciousness and fiscal reform politics—but was

14. Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); on the prevalence of political lobbying aimed at extracting social legislation from government in this era, see Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), ch. 1.

15. Russell's cabinet was also not as enthusiastic about reforms as he was; he was facing complaints about unprincipled responsiveness to factional criticism. Jonathan Parry, *The*



also undermined by their broader scope and real politics. As Hewitt shows, motions in 1850 failed, and the campaign fragmented; the radicalism of NASC and its insistence on tying the three taxes together alienated more conservative voices. To overcome fragmentation, the campaign was reorganized in 1851, and NSAC was subsumed under the Association for the Promotion of the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge (APRTOK). APTROK mobilized a diverse set of interest groups to petition Parliament, and attacked the inconsistencies in implementation by the Board of Inland Revenue (hereafter the Revenue). The pressure led to the establishment of a select committee headed by Gibson in 1851, which issued a critical report calling for repeal.

Agitation continued as governments changed. In 1853, Lord Aberdeen was prime minister of a Whig-Peelite (anti-Tory) coalition, and William Gladstone was chancellor of Exchequer. The divisive issue of fiscal policy was the use of taxes for redistribution while avoiding debt. Gladstone viewed indirect taxes, the advertisement duty included, as part of a needed package within a broader goal of balancing the budget to retain political stability. In his 1853 budget, he opted, albeit not without hesitation, for a reduced advertisement duty over repeal. Thus, the prospect of repeal was once again drowned in broader political stakes. However, the government was defeated on this point in a night of parliamentary maneuvers, and the advertisement duty became the first of the three taxes to be repealed.<sup>16</sup>

As this brief review clarifies, the advertisement duty was only one—and in retrospect the easiest—goal in the campaign. It was not consistently conceived of as a separate theme, but rather as part of tax inhibitions on newspapers, the ultimate focus being democratic consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the need to discuss each tax in itself and engage in political maneuvering led to devoted attention to the duty. Even then, some of the attention

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*Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), ch. 8.

16. The decision passed when government supporters had left the House after voting for Gladstone's budget. On the drama of the night's votes, see Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*, ch. 2; Collet, *History of the Taxes on Knowledge*. The government finally accepted the result. On the budget, see, for example, Henry C. G. Matthew, "Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Politics of Mid-Victorian Budgets," *The Historical Journal* 22 (1979): 615–43; Peter Gurney, *Wanting and Having: Popular Politics and Liberal Consumerism in England, 1830–70* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), ch. 8; and Hewitt's account of Gladstone's indecisiveness between repeal and reduction, in Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*.

17. The fact that the duty applied only to newspaper advertisements, and was a minor source of government revenue, rightly raised suspicions that its real target was indeed political control of newspapers. For example, *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, March 29, 1851, 290.

addressed issues that exceeded the meaning of advertising, particularly questions of just tax policy. The inconsistency of the tax, which applied to newspapers but not to other advertising media such as handbills, posters, or magazines, and its regressive character—a flat tax, more prohibitive for small advertisers, small advertisements, and newspapers with small circulations that could not attract advertisers—were all arguments mobilized in the process.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the highly active and publicly visible campaign pushed participants to debate the category of advertisement and its significance. The most interesting and successful element of the efforts turned on the social benefits of advertising, examined in the next section.

### *The Communication of Wants*

Consider the two following celebrations of advertisements, one early in the campaign and another summing it up. They represent two versions of the theme that won the day: the communication of wants.

Language (the power of communicating his thoughts, the expression of his wants) constitutes the great distinction between man and the brute creation. . . Any thing, then, which, in any degree, deprives man of the power of expressing his wants, has a tendency to bring him nearer a lower species of being. . . The expression of thought, speech, is. . . intangible and impalpable, but there is a mode of fixing it by the printing press, and immediately it is taxed!<sup>19</sup>

The alternation in the advertisement duty, by removing restrictions upon communication between parties desirous of meeting each other. . . will produce. . . vast moral revolution. . . The inevitable increase in the number of advertisers will necessitate changes that will bring the people who issue advertisements more directly in contact with the people who read those always useful, often amusing, and frequently important announcements.<sup>20</sup>

As these examples suggest, advertisements were framed at once practically and ideationally. They were a practical exchange of individualized information among persons whose market-oriented “wants” were givens, but who were barred from revealing and so realizing them. At the same time, the exchange was elevated speech, humanity’s expressive capacities beyond its physical needs.

The communication of wants was a conceptual framework increasingly elaborated with the pressure to separate the three taxes on knowledge.

18. For example, *Illustrated London News*, March 22, 1851, 243 (deputation to Russell).

19. *Liverpool Mercury*, May 8, 1849, 8.

20. *Daily News*, September 16, 1853, 7.

Early campaigners often rested their position on “the dignity of a public principle” of knowledge and education for the people.<sup>21</sup> Gibson continually maintained that the taxes were connected, as the governmental history of dealing with them together proved. However, difficulties in Parliament led him to accept a separation and to encourage members to vote without feeling committed to the full length of his campaign.<sup>22</sup> When pressed to discuss the advertisement duty on its own, the dominant view was that it was only indirectly a tax on knowledge in the political sense of the campaign.

If advertising was not knowledge like other newspaper content, that was not because it was merely a funding source for newspapers, of a lesser order than political knowledge. On the contrary, advertising was conceptualized as a special kind of knowledge, less abstract and more directly involved in social interaction; taxing it was “more generally onerous than taxes upon knowledge, since it taxed commerce, agriculture, literature, and the social wants of the community. It taxed opinions, and the transactions between man and man. It went further; it taxed the arts, and even religious communication.”<sup>23</sup> The *Lady’s Newspaper and Pictorial Times* explained the conflation of knowledge with what “would be a better word” in discussing advertisements—information: “To the servant or youth who wants a place, all ‘knowledge’ converges to the centre of his particular need.”<sup>24</sup> Although the banner of knowledge remained the effective header of the campaign, the emphasis regarding advertisements was more akin to information, a realm of factuality and transparent communication ideally freed of contextual complexity.<sup>25</sup>

Gibson, whose oratory skills did much for the campaign in Parliament, wedded the practical communication of wants with higher ideals when he described the tax as a ban on free speech: “A tax on advertisements! A tax providing that no man may say what he wishes, or tell what he wants, in the

21. Collet, *History of the Taxes on Knowledge*, 128, referring to a speech by Holyoake in a meeting of the Association for the Abolition of the Duty on Paper, January 1851. See also *Bradford Observer*, January 3, 1850, 4, describing the taxes as “spiritual window duties, which exclude the light of truth from the soul.”

22. Commons Sitting, April 14, 1853.

23. William Ewart in the House of Commons, *Times*, May 8, 1850, 4; see also *The Examiner*; January 4, 1851, 3; and *The Athenaeum*, January 12, 1850, 33 (proceedings of the London Committee for the Repeal of the Advertisement Duty, founded by the *Athenaeum’s* publisher, John Francis).

24. *The Lady’s Newspaper & Pictorial Times*, July 23, 1853, 3.

25. Part 2 discusses the shift in the role of newspapers themselves from more complex “views” to “news,” which gestured at a neutral communication of information. On the informational emphasis, see also James E. P. Mussell, “Elemental Forms: The Newspaper as Popular Genre in the Nineteenth Century,” *Media History* 20 (2014): 4–20.

way of business transactions, without being fined eighteenpence every time he speaks through the only channel by means of which he can make himself generally heard." He continued: "There is nothing a man has to sell which some other man does not want to purchase, if they could only be brought together."<sup>26</sup> Trade, like citizens, required freedom of speech. How can trade be free, asked the *Bradford Observer*, "if the merchant may not tell the world that he has goods to dispose of?"<sup>27</sup> The tax on free speech in trade, it was argued, was worse than limiting political free speech, because "the stamp and advertising duties are fines, not on opinions, but on facts."<sup>28</sup>

*Punch* saw the amusing side of these formulations; early in the campaign it printed an ironic rendering of an "enormous meeting of Advertisers of all dominations" who gather noisily to agitate against the advertisement duty. The comic characters attack the duty as a "blow at *habeas corpus*," one that "if the Queen only knew it" would not be allowed.<sup>29</sup> Yet the association of advertisements with freedoms to communicate foundational information was effective. It could be tied to foregone revenues for the state. APR TOK also argued that the denial of "means of communication" not only prevented revenues, but actually destroyed value, because "[t]housands misemploy their time from mere ignorance of the wants of others."<sup>30</sup> The tax was a veil of darkness, a structure of miscommunication.

By the time of repeal, the synonymy between the advertisement duty and the banner of communication of wants was broadly familiar. The *Era* summarized the achievement: "A tax injurious to the spread of information. . . is on the point of extermination. The revolution which the abolition of the long obnoxious eighteenpence will probably be very great, and a vast impetus will be communicated to the extension of business of all kinds. . . Common sense, the principles of common justice and reason, and the at length received conviction that the advertisement duty was a clog upon intercommunications of mutual wants. . . were the allies by whose help the victory has been achieved."<sup>31</sup>

The communication of wants was a market paradigm that captured not only commodity selling but also market employment. Opening up the job market by notifying workers across the country about numerous job opportunities was an important element in advertising, not yet singled

26. Commons Sitting, April 22, 1852.

27. *Bradford Observer*, January 17, 1850, 4.

28. *Athenaeum*, December 4, 1852 (Cobden).

29. *Punch*, April 27, 1850, 167.

30. *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, March 29, 1851, 290.

31. *Era*, July 24, 1853, 9.

out as a distinct classified section, and useful in the campaign. George Jacob Holyoake’s the *Reasoner*, for example, relied on the poor governess trope to deride the regressive tax, which required her to pay as much as “a wealthy insurance Company or a prosperous mercantile establishment.”<sup>32</sup> The *Newcastle Guardian* was happy to take it to the extreme: “If a poor orphan lad thinks he could get a job...or a girl on the verge of prostitution or beggary fancies she might hear of a situation, by putting an advertisement in the paper, the Government steps in...and...swells the long catalogue of crime.”<sup>33</sup> The downward trajectory to crime could end even more badly: “How many have sunk into a premature grave from the...cause.”<sup>34</sup>

The poor employee trope was ambitious. Some mistook it to imply that only classified advertisements for lower-class employment should be exempted from the tax.<sup>35</sup> However, its role in the campaign was to construe all advertisements as carriers of speech in the market, “a medium of universal communication”<sup>36</sup> extending abstractly the imagined face-to-face interaction of the market square to a national level. In the debate in Parliament that finally led to repeal, Gladstone argued that the tax was on trade and, to a lesser extent, labor, but Cobden resisted. No, he said, it was a “tax on the intercommunication of wants and wishes, which, in a commercial community, strikes at the foundation of all transactions.” What would be said, he continued, “if it were sought to lay a tax on every bargain made, or attempted to be made, on the Exchange, between merchants who meet there at four o’clock, if the asking the rate of exchange between London and Hamburg were to render the broker seeking the information liable to a tax? Yet that is what you do under the advertisement duty.”<sup>37</sup>

America was the counterexample, the land of free communication of wants. Joseph Hume was envious of the tax-free American system: “He held in his hand an American paper which was sold for a cent, and contained a thousand advertisements, making known all the wants of the

32. *Reasoner*, 1850, Vol. vii. No. 171, 155–56 (citing with admiration the *Dublin Commercial Journal*). See *Observer*, February 3, 1851, 3, for a report of the same argument in a deputation to Charles Wood.

33. *Newcastle Guardian*, October 6, 1849, 5. See also *Bradford Observer*, January 17, 1850, 4: “This is something more than a tax upon labour; it is a fine levied upon the attempt to seek for it!”

34. *Liverpool Mercury*, May 8, 1849, 8. See also *Aberdeen Journal*, April 20, 1853, 8.

35. For example, *Examiner*, October 25, 1851; and *Standard*, May 13, 1852, 2.

36. *Morning Post*, January 14, 1850, 6.

37. Commons Sitting, July 1, 1853.

community.”<sup>38</sup> Charles Dickens, who did not support repeal, ridiculed the lust for America. He was not a dominant voice in the debate about advertising: his main concern was not advertisements in themselves but that reform would unleash “blackguard,” low quality newspapers.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, after the repeal, he published an ironic rendering of *Cinderella* for the age of platform professionals. In Dickens’s *Cinderella*, the prince advertised for the women of the kingdom to try on the glass shoe. Recalling the campaign’s references to America, the narrative voice soaked in irony: “for, the advertisement duty, an impost most unjust in principle and most unfair in operation, did not exist in that country; neither was the stamp on newspapers known in that land—which had as many newspapers as the United States, and got as much good out of them.”<sup>40</sup>

The communication-of-wants construction emphasized a number of elements: discrete communication over collective meanings, information over persuasion, and strict factuality over imagination. It thus limited the discussion of advertisements’ cultural role. The benefit was in two complementary appeals: the communication of wants soothed the radical edge of the campaign with market individualism, and offered an appealingly rational vision of national life.

The radical motivation, it should be reiterated, was feared. Withdrawing governmental limitations on newspapers therefore had to be seen as a pacifying mechanism: knowledge had to be explained as a nonrevolutionary tool, an appeal that resonated in the aftermath of 1848, but was also true in the 1830s, when some radicals argued that all unrest would cease if only the newspaper press was not taxed.<sup>41</sup> Supporters of the campaign argued that “[p]ower, as was shown on all hands, was rapidly passing into the possession of the multitude; and it could only be made safe by the accompaniment of knowledge.”<sup>42</sup> The communication of wants described market-oriented individuals, separately seeking to sell, buy, and work according to their separately predefined wishes; set against fears of the multitude, it was particularly unthreatening. It simultaneously

38. *Ibid.*

39. Charles Dickens, Letter to W. C. Macready, January 31, 1852, in Gilbert Ashville Pierce, *Life, Letters, and Speeches of Charles Dickens*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1891), 300–301. The alternative view, promoted in the campaign, was that the removal of taxes would allow real news to replace “trashy tales.” Report from the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, 1851, q. 679 (hereafter Report).

40. *Household Words*, October 1, 1853, 8.

41. Jones, *Powers of the Press*, ch. 1.

42. *Daily News*, April 17, 1850, 4, reporting a debate in Parliament (John Roebuck).

legitimized advertising for the masses, and more broadly their consumer agency, and delimited its implications to a thinly formal market paradigm.

Alongside the soothing individualism, national life emerged as a peacefully rational coordination through free speech, cutting across political discord, and providing a clear and agreed-upon picture of progressive realities. In an 1852 Parliamentary debate, William Clay glorified the information provided by advertisements over that of news: “No one could doubt the great ability manifest in the leading articles in the *Times*, or its admirable arrangements for the collection and prompt diffusion of news from all parts of the world; but if you went into the shops and warehouses and counting-houses of men of all shades of political opinion, and asked them why they took the *Times*, you would find them all concur in one reason. . .it was indispensable to them to take in a paper in which they found such a vast amount of information as was supplied in its advertisements. . .”<sup>43</sup>

The information, it was repeatedly argued, allowed an understanding of the progress and character of the country. Some accounts argued that advertisements communicated not just the progressive condition of national life, but also local culture; they allowed people to be part of their immediate surroundings, beyond the pale of London. William Ewart, for example, explained during sessions of the Select Committee that advertisements allowed local communities “to know what they are about, and what is doing around them.”<sup>44</sup> In these versions, advertising was a democratic representation and form of inclusion.

The success of the communication of wants was born out by the failure of opposition to articulate an alternative conceptualization of advertising. Most of those who did not support the repeal nonetheless expressed support for the substantive arguments of the campaign, and explained their choices by resorting to over-riding considerations, typically political loyalties, or the financial needs of the government. The only resounding argument came from landed paternalists who drew on little more than traditional suspicions of “puffery.” Here was Henry Drummond: “And what do you want? Why, you want the advertisement duty to be taken off; you want to be puffed off in the newspapers.” Let the laborer have his beer in the evening if you care for him, he argued, not a newspaper.<sup>45</sup> Even less powerful was the Earl of Clancarty, who appealed to advertisers’ interests: “the practice of advertising certainly requires no encouragement;

43. Commons Sitting, May 12, 1852.

44. Report, qq. 650, 669. See also q. 2356. Provincial newspapers which expanded after the repeal indeed exhibited local contents, advertisements included. Andrew Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855–1900* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2018).

45. Commons Sitting, February 19, 1850.

its very excess defeats in a great measure the interests of advertisers. . . .<sup>46</sup> With such limited alternatives, the conceptual account won the day. The first edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* after the repeal, in 1878, could confidently assert that repeal was “[i]n compliance with all but unanimous voice of the public.”<sup>47</sup>

The picture of midcentury bears emphasis: Advertising—one of the cornerstones of capitalist culture and expansion—received some of the most enthusiastic support in its history through a campaign rooted in radical politics. The support reflected the sway of free-trade radicalism, but it was not limited to it. Historians, as noted, have often associated the decisive victory of capitalism with the commercial press. However, the ironic fact that radical politics themselves were implicated in this history has often been dismissed;<sup>48</sup> meanwhile, the specific implication of radical politics in framing advertising has been entirely overlooked. The roots of the campaign in radicalism carried over to the arguments marshalled for advertising. Explicit support was most obvious in radical attacks on the advertisement duty from working-class perspectives, which saw advertising as a communicative means for gaining employment, and the duty as an unequal burden on the most disadvantaged. Implicit support was just as crucial: within the campaign’s dynamics, the communication of wants paradigm did not meet with sustained radical challenges.<sup>49</sup> Advertising was thus given justifications that exceeded its practical function in releasing newspapers from political control.

After the repeal of the taxes, the newspaper industry grew rapidly. The total number of newspapers in Britain rose about 500 in 1850, to more than 2,280 by 1914.<sup>50</sup> Circulations jumped. Figures are contested given limitations of sources, but rough indications reveal the dramatic change: annual sales rose from approximately 85,000,000 copies in 1851, to more than 5,600,000,000 in 1920; the number of newspapers purchased per year

46. Lords Sitting, July 28, 1853.

47. “Advertisement,” in Thomas S. Baynes, ed., *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., vol. 1 (1878), 178.

48. But see Hewitt’s argument against reductions of the campaign to Manchester free trade radicalism. Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*, ch. 1.

49. The irony is manifest when we look, for example, at Sidney Webb’s socialist ideas about advertising: He argued that an informational ideal of the kind promoted by the campaign would only apply to advertising in a socialist cooperative commonwealth, whereas capitalist advertising is “decided by irresponsible individuals. . . and not even pretending that their statements are either true or for the common good.” Sidney Webb, “Introduction,” in G. W. Goodall, *Advertising: A Study of a Modern Business Power* (London: Constable & Co., 1914), xvi–xvii.

50. A count based on the British Library catalogue February 2018, representing newspapers for which copies survive, hence this is a rough indication only.



per capita by persons over the age of 14 rose from 6 copies in 1850, to 182 in 1920. Even allowing for a reduction in the number of readers per copy because of the decline in collective newspaper consumption, the audience increased sharply.<sup>51</sup> Advertisements became newspapers’ main source of financial security.<sup>52</sup> At the close of the century, William Stead Jr. argued, “Were advertising to cease, not one in a hundred papers and periodicals would outlive the year.”<sup>53</sup> The idea, boldly put by the MP and owner of *Truth*, Henry Labouchere, in 1881, that in present conditions the advertisement department was the most important one in a newspaper, was hard to swallow for the heads of the Fourth Estate. The owner of the *Daily Telegraph* tried to refute it, only to actually confirm: “I should say that the literary department was the most important, because if that were not efficiently conducted you could not make a good position for the paper, and attract advertisements.”<sup>54</sup> Part 2 examines the pressures that newspapers faced in this atmosphere, and their responses.

## 2. Advertisements versus News

### *Fetters of the Free Press*

With the rapid expansion of advertising, we can begin to see the limits of the campaign’s victory. The financial interests and political aspirations of newspaper owners required that advertisements be recognized as a distinct type of publication, separately paid for, and subordinated to their control of the medium. However, advertisers were resistant, and resistance took

51. Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*. See discussion and more data in Alfred P. Wadsworth, “Newspaper Circulations 1800–1954,” in *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society*, session 1954–1955 (Manchester: Manchester Statistical Society, 1955); Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Appendix C. Generally, circulations of individual newspapers were in the thousands until midcentury, with some unusual figures in the tens of thousands; hundreds of thousands appeared in the 1860s and 1870s, and millions appeared toward the close the century.

52. Lee estimates that in the 1860s and 1870s one half to two thirds of smaller provincial papers’ revenue came from advertising. For Sunday papers, 30–40% of the revenue came from advertisements. Alan J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855–1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1976). The space devoted to advertisements increased, as did their total numbers. See also Hampton, *Visions of the Press*, for an account of the rising importance of advertising revenue. See further details below, note 57.

53. William Stead, Jr., *The Art of Advertising: Its Theory and Practice Fully Described* (London: T. B. Browne. 1899), 128. Stead offered estimates of numbers of advertisements in leadings papers, *ibid.*, pt. 3, ch. 2.

54. R. v. Labouchere, Queen’s Bench, *Northampton Mercury*, March 26, 1881, 13.

varied forms. An advertiser might have wanted a piece published for free; a publication originating from an advertiser might have been offered to a newspaper through other sources; an advertiser might have been willing to pay but required a say on the placement of the publication; he may have wanted to place it in news or editorial columns or asked that it be printed without conventional marks of advertisements;<sup>55</sup> or he might have conditioned a contract for paid advertisements on a newspaper's willingness to include additional material that he offered. If, as the midcentury legislation confirmed, advertisements were part of free speech, an informational realm of the first order on both national and local levels, and, per the testimony of Michael James Whitty, newspaper owner and editor, "amongst the most desirable reading," then these varied ways of resisting clear distinctions between advertisements and news were not ungrounded.<sup>56</sup> Newspapers had to develop responses, which pushed back against the communication of wants paradigm.

The victory of the campaign thus initiated a dialectic: As newspapers' business models moved from political paternalism to advertising, the need to distinguish news from advertisements asserted itself, and required a readjustment of the meaning of advertising. The power of the campaign was in forcing a dialogue with the informational ideal it posited. This section examines the shifts in the conceptualization of advertising brought about by newspapers. It focuses on the 1880s and onwards, years that capture the height of the challenge of defining advertising, after two and a half decades of newspaper press expansion. These years have been identified by historians as distinctive in two senses: commercialization—with advertising as newspapers' financial engine—and professionalization of the British press.<sup>57</sup> As these processes advanced, newspapers' battle with

55. Formal indications of advertisements within newspapers were diverse, yet most newspapers printed advertisements in running columns occupying the front and back pages. In addition to placement, indications often included separations by whole single lines within columns, and fonts smaller than news after the first line. For a discussion of newspaper forms see, for example, Mussell, "Elemental Forms."

56. Report, q. 669

57. Whether the period was revolutionary or continuous with earlier trends is a matter of debate. To briefly recall the two processes: The tax reform of midcentury marked one stage in shifting newspapers' financial basis to the market. The fall in newspaper prices (halved for popular papers in the 1850s, and again in the 1860s), and rising capital requirements, led to dependence on advertising for profitability. Market structures, however, did not imply the end of political patronage. They were an opportunity to divert newspapers to political ends anew, particularly by Liberal elites who saw the market as an agent of diversity, and sought to replace the traditional practices of intimacy between editors and government ministers. Limited liability legislation allowed subscribers to become shareholders to whom editors were directly answerable. Both ownership and the selling of space served political

advertisers over the substantive control of their medium became salient. Pressures on advertising prices and terms of contracts (commissions, credit, periods of commitment, exclusivity and more<sup>58</sup>), on paid contributions to press directories published by advertising agencies, on circulation data, and most crucially on the content and form of newspapers, were all mounting.

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control over press publications. The next stage followed the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act, when political candidates could no longer buy newspapers; direct political finance, if not entirely at an end, had to go underground (it disappeared in the interwar period). The business owners of papers had, of course, identified political allegiances, and advertisers could also exercise political discrimination; for example, a boycott by some on the *Daily News* in 1886 when it campaigned for Home Rule. The government was itself an advertiser, and worked on a partisan basis. The more common discrimination in financial support, however, was economic; its political edge was rooted in advertisers' perceptions of the relation between a politics of a newspaper and its economic readership. Newspaper prices continued to fall while newspapers became larger industrial organizations requiring significant capital, and advertising expenditure continued to rise steadily. The same period saw further exponential growth in numbers and circulations. It also saw incorporation and concentration of ownership, ushering in the era of the so-called Press Barons. By 1913, 90% of leading daily and evening newspapers became limited liability companies, replacing the historical structure of individual ownership; from the 1890s, major ones were listed on the London Stock Exchange, while many small ones closed. The professionalization of news reporting involved not only structural reorganization but also attempts to delineate a professional ethics and ideology. News reporting, and the newspaper itself, gradually emerged as a particular calling, distinct from literature, part of a mass communication that would later expand to include new kinds of media. Discussions of the inter-relations between commercialization and professionalization intensified with the New Journalism, characterized by shorter and speedy news coverage, more “human interest” stories, a more informal literary style, visual matter, and typographical boldness. On controversies about the newness of New Journalism see, Mark Hampton, “Newspapers in Victorian Britain,” *History Compass* 2 (2004): 1–8. On professionalization see also discussion accompanying note 178. See, generally, Jones, *Powers of the Press*; Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*; Lee, *Origins of the Popular Press*, ch. 4; Joel H. Wiener, *The Americanization of the British Press, 1830s–1914: Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); and Martin Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture* (London: Sage, 2002). On the process on incorporation, see Henry A. Taylor, *Robert Donald* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1934), 266 (address by Robert Donald, 1913).

58. There was no single contractual setting for newspapers' relations with advertisers. Much of the discussion concerned advertising agents. By the late nineteenth century, most papers would not sell space to an agent (or the so called “advertising contractor”) without a specified client, but rather would work with orders. Agents were usually paid commissions of 10–15% by newspapers, rather than directly by the business client; some rebated clients, thus lowering the cost of advertising for them; many others proposed to leverage their position with the newspapers. The newspaper charge was paid by the client in some cases, and by agents in many others. Agents provided varying services: the largest agencies handled full campaigns, including the writing of copy, whereas smaller ones might have just placed advertisements.

Newspapers were defending themselves against allegations that they were in the service of advertisers.<sup>59</sup>

The circulars of the Newspaper Society are an important source in recovering this history.<sup>60</sup> The Society was established in 1836. Initially the “Provincial Newspaper Society,” the organization represented the interests of provincial newspapers until they merged with the London newspapers in 1889. In 1860 the Society had 139 members, in 1881, it had 250; by the mid-1890s there were 360 members, just under 50 of them owners of London papers; in 1900, it was claimed that the number of newspapers owned by members was 725;<sup>61</sup> in 1903, membership was 348, representing approximately 1,000 newspapers, which were, as the Society’s circular now consistently declared, “practically all of the London and Provincial daily press, and the leading weeklies”;<sup>62</sup> in 1908 membership was up to 357, and could “speak with authority on behalf of practically the whole press of the land.”<sup>63</sup> The declared purposes of the Society included “careful supervision over Advertising Contractors and Agents, some of whom seek to impose upon and defraud Newspaper Proprietors.” The circulars were prepared by the Society’s secretary, Henry Whorlow, charged with “watching over and obtaining information about, Advertisers and Advertising Agents” and passing it on to the Society’s members.<sup>64</sup> Whorlow also advised newspapers individually, obtaining legal advice as needed. He estimated that between 1881 and 1903, approximately 23,000 letters were written in response to individual inquiries, largely relating to advertising.<sup>65</sup> A central problematic in the circular was the categorization of publications. It ran a regular section, “Advertisements Disguised as News,” aimed to alert the unwary, and to discipline members about boundaries.<sup>66</sup> It also

59. For example, H. Gilzean-Reid, “Mr. Harold Cox on Journalism,” *Times*, March 29, 1910, 9.

60. Held by St. Bride Institute, London.

61. *NSC*, April 1900, 2.

62. *NSC* June 1903, 3.

63. *NSC* June 1908, 18.

64. *NSC* June 1885, 2. The explicit goal of supervising advertisers was submerged in 1889 under “all topics having a practical interest for Newspaper Proprietors,” *NSC* August, 1889, 1, but the interest in advertising continued as a persistent preoccupation. The “supervision” over advertisers was a tricky business, not least because doing so in a circular issued in a few hundred copies every month ran a risk of libel suits, and of jeopardized business. Amusingly, the circular was issued as confidential, and Whorlow was repeatedly disappointed to learn that it landed in the wrong hands.

65. *NSC* June 1903, 3.

66. The section morphed in the 1900s into a generalized “advertisement department,” reflecting not only an expanding array of issues, but also the incoherence of the conceptual boundaries that marked advertisements apart from news.

carefully followed litigation in local and national courts involving advertisers. Its historical value lies in its double function as a detailed descriptive record, and a normative source for an un-unionized trade; it collected information from members revealing how various newspapers dealt with advertisers, and disseminated it alongside recommended policies.

### *Two Views of Advertising*

Newspapers’ responses to pressures from advertisers involved two dominant views on the categorization of publications. According to one view, the profit motive of the advertiser was the determining question. From this perspective, if an item could enhance a business’s profit, or even save it money it would otherwise spend, it was an advertisement. Any mention of a business name therefore gravitated toward the “advertisement”-side. To return to the report in the introduction of this article of a legal case of forgery, in categorizing it as an advertisement, the circular did not note unusual content: neither in the complimenting description, nor in the apparent redundancy of the legal proceedings. It noted the number of “allusions to Cobden’s Pills and the Drug Company.”<sup>67</sup> The circular customarily flagged in the same way any mentions of business names; all of them reflected business profit interests. We might call this the “pecuniary view.”

A second approach centered on the discretionary independence of newspaper professionals, regardless of the advertiser’s motive. The important point from this perspective, elaborated in the *Nineteenth Century* by H. James Palmer, editor of the *Yorkshire Post*, was not that a business was mentioned, even in commendatory terms; it was instead that the editor was indifferent to the advertisers’ interests and could equally publish criticism.<sup>68</sup> We might call this the “professionalist view.”

The two views spoke to the codependent processes of commercialization and professionalization of the newspaper press. The professionalist view often came into the picture to compensate for the limits of the pecuniary one, but it also shared much with it. Both views involved an assumption that the profit interests of advertisers made their publications epistemologically suspect. The suspicion was accompanied by rhetorical insistences on the difference between advertisements and news, which were hard to support in practice. The consequence was a second commonality: a tendency to treat formal separations—in the location and marking of advertisements

67. NSC, December 1883, 14.

68. H. James Palmer, “The March of the Advertiser,” *Nineteenth Century*, January 1897, 135–41.

in newspapers, and in divisions of functions, departments, and sourcing in agencies and newspapers—as indications of difference, when they were in fact the main support for it, and often breached. The effort, throughout, was a negotiation of fine lines between observance and violation of an asserted difference between news and advertisements. The two complementary views, with all their ironies and challenges, ultimately brought about a reconceptualization of advertising. The following sections examine them in turn.

### *In Search of the Profit Motive*

The pecuniary view was not created out of whole cloth by newspapers; it had roots in the state practice of collecting the advertisement duty. The Newspaper Society prided itself on its “prominent part in the movement for the abolition of the ‘taxes on knowledge’”;<sup>69</sup> however, the “freed” press ironically adopted the state practices that it had decried for decades, with very little critical awareness as far as sources reveal. Those practices are a good starting point for an exploration of the pecuniary view.

In 1851, the Revenue decided to apply the advertisement duty to announcements of “arrivals at hotels,” a Victorian celebrity-gossip favourite.<sup>70</sup> Each hotel name would give rise to a charge as a separate advertisement.<sup>71</sup> The *York Herald* thundered: “To officially forbid this trifling gratification to the public . . . through fear that the Innkeepers may derive a little advantage from this mode of publicity, is one of the most contemptible movements ever made by officials of a *liberal* Government in an *enlightened* nation. . . .” It hoped that reports of the Queen’s whereabouts would be forbidden, to drive home the full absurdity of the Revenue’s interpretation.<sup>72</sup> The *Daily News* decided to launch a local revolt, and published a list of arrivals that it brought to the Revenue’s attention. The Revenue, at this high point of the campaign against taxes on knowledge, withdrew.<sup>73</sup> The clash was not unusual. The advertisement duty was collected directly from newspapers: the stamp authorities got copies of every issue, counted advertisements, and calculated the charge; they were, therefore, in repeated clashes with newspapers. Like the Newspaper Society half a century later, the Revenue was

69. NSC June 1903, 4; and NSC January 1904, 10–11. The history of its support may have been less straightforward: As Hewitt suggests, there are indications that a significant number of its members were apprehensive about repeal. Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*, ch. 2. The later consciousness, however, is the important point here.

70. *Bristol Mercury*, May 17, 1851, 8.

71. *Daily News*, September 24, 1851, 5.

72. *York Herald*, September 13, 1851, 5.

73. *Daily News*, September 24, 1851, 5.

seeking a rule of thumb that would maximize its revenue, and answer to a defensible logic. The profit motive was its solution.

Newspapers complained about the Revenue’s “excessive strictness.”<sup>74</sup> They rallied against what they saw as an overpowering suspicion of any private profit. The *Era* accused it of prohibiting reports in which there was public interest just because it was begrudging gratification to individuals.<sup>75</sup> The cause in this instant was horse racing reports, but the Revenue’s principle was all encompassing. A book review would become an advertisement if it mentioned a price, or if it commended the book;<sup>76</sup> an article about a fair,<sup>77</sup> a mention of a musical society,<sup>78</sup> or a report about boat races was charged as advertisements.<sup>79</sup> Newspapers summarized the principle: “paragraphs referring to events to take place. . . when there is a pecuniary interest in them.”<sup>80</sup> To avoid liability, they were omitting particulars such as names and dates. They complained that they were being pushed to be “somewhat niggardly and stingy in our insertion of complementary paragraphs.”<sup>81</sup> Perhaps pantomimes would be the venue for untaxed exuberance, as *Punch* had it (Figure 1).

Frustrated newspapers argued for a straight line leading from the Queen’s whereabouts to the sale of commodities: “Who shall say that. . .all news or information is not taxable?”<sup>82</sup> Alexander Sinclair of the *Glasgow Herald* reflected, publications “which newspapers have been accustomed to insert merely as pieces of news and as likely to interest their readers, have been suddenly discovered to be advertisements. . .”<sup>83</sup>

And yet, when the state no longer managed the distinction between advertisements and other content, and the interest in advertising revenue fell to newspapers themselves, they applied the Revenue’s logic. We can find an analogous recommendation by the Newspaper Society for virtually any Revenue position that frustrated newspapers. If hotel names were suspect for the tax authorities, so were the attractions of a town seeking to interest tourists suspect for newspapers.<sup>84</sup> The circular even warned that weather reports, which had become standard in dailies, were suspected

74. *Times*, May 8, 1950, 2.

75. *Era*, March 19, 1848, 9.

76. *Athenaeum*, August 22, 1835, 652; and *Age*, November 16, 1828, 364.

77. *York Herald*, April 16, 1831, 3.

78. *York Herald*, May 4, 1833, 3.

79. *Liverpool Mercury*, September 28, 1827, 6.

80. *Leeds Mercury*, December 23, 1848, 5; see also *Newcastle Guardian*, October 6, 1849, 5.

81. *Newcastle Guardian*, October 6, 1849, 5.

82. *Era*, March 19, 1848, 9.

83. Quoted in Goodall, *Advertising*, 10.

84. *NSC* February 1894, 7.

**IMPORTANT TO TAILORS, PILL-MERCHANTS, &c.**

ADVERTISING in pantomimes is rapidly rising into popular favour, and is an ingenious method of evading the advertisement duty. We have drawn up the following SCALE OF PRICES FOR PANTOMIME ADVERTISEMENTS for those puffing tradesmen who are anxious to get their goods off by the help of harlequin, clown, and pantaloon:—

	£	s.	d.
A trick, with complete change . . . . .	0	5	0
A very good ditto, with blue-fire, or gunpowder . . . . .	0	7	6
A joke, by clown, (per scene) . . . . .	0	10	0
Something beyond a joke . . . . .	0	15	0
Half a scene, with correct view of the shop, or nostrum . . . . .	2	10	0
The entire stage, with flats, real doors, a leap through the window, appropriate music, and a red-hot poker . . . . .	5	0	0

Figure 1. Evading the advertisement duty. Source: *Punch*, January 11, 1845, 26.

advertisements, with “a tendency to see only the bright side of the barometer.”<sup>85</sup> Fashionable “literary notes” were flagged as advertisements for books, just as the Revenue flagged reviews;<sup>86</sup> if the Revenue taxed musical society notices, Whorlow remonstrated against attempts to get free notices of Brinsmead’s concerts, more on which subsequently;<sup>87</sup> a billiard competition notice organized by a manufacturer of billiard tables was cause for the circular’s scrutiny, just as sporting events were for the Revenue.<sup>88</sup> The circular routinely advised that reports of exhibitions mentioning specific products should be treated as advertisements, and that exhibitions themselves, serving as a source of revenue for organizers, were matters of debate, as fairs were for the Revenue.<sup>89</sup> The pursuit of business names that stood for the profit interest was no trivial effort. Even death was not beyond suspicion: obituary notices and debates about burial methods might mention a business that stood to profit from publicity.<sup>90</sup> In his 1919 lectures, Russell complained that if an advertised product happened to enter into the news, “the papers will go ever so far round to avoid naming it.”<sup>91</sup>

Business name dropping was consistently flagged by newspapers as advertising, and the Society advised its members to avoid free mentions. More generally, the circular advocated a cynical view of advertisers’

85. *NSC* August 1902, 7; see also *NSC* July 1903, 3.

86. *NSC* April 13, 1882, 11.

87. *NSC* March 1892, 7–8.

88. *NSC* March 1888, 16.

89. *NSC* September 1883, 12.

90. *NSC* April 1903, 10; and *NSC* December 1903, 10.

91. Russell, *Commercial Advertising*, 24–25.



appeals to the public interest given their private pecuniary one. Newspapers’ stakes were higher than stakes had been for the Revenue: the advertisement duty had been a small budget component and only one part of press control, but the news/advertisements distinction was a matter of survival, of power—economic and political—and of self-definition for commercial newspapers. In a context of sharp increase in advertising volume, more systematic approaches of professional advertisers than either the Revenue or earlier newspapers encountered, and the established framing of advertising as essential information following the mid-century campaign, the pecuniary view was advocated and tested across a dizzying array of challenges, which revealed its limitations.

Advertisers argued that there was a direct and general public interest in their commodities, be they survey maps of which the public was ignorant,<sup>92</sup> bicycles with which it was ecstatic,<sup>93</sup> new inventions like safe paraffin lamps,<sup>94</sup> cures for cancer,<sup>95</sup> or anything in between. Styles of proposed publications varied to include business-like reports, lectures, historical accounts of the business or the branded commodity, and articles with a promotional and sensational tone. When a newspaper was recalcitrant, advertisers could be explicit: “Will you allow me to point out that. . . it is an advertisement not for the benefit, or only very indirectly for the benefit of the college, but very directly for the benefit of persons living in the locality. . .”<sup>96</sup> Advertisers also pointed out that they were the only professional sources for the technical details of their products.<sup>97</sup> These positions endorsed the logic of the campaign against the advertisement duty.

In many published reflections on advertising, importantly in the burgeoning literature of press directories, advertisers continued to develop the same meanings, Henry Sell, for example, argued that “to the trading community, the markets and the advertising columns. . . are not only significant, but indispensable.”<sup>98</sup> When Clarence Moran defined “advertisement,” he said it was “primarily the expression of a want,”<sup>99</sup> whereas J. B. Williams marvelled at “the plight of our ancestors” who had lived

92. NSC January 1887, 17.

93. NSC August 1896, 7; and NSC December 1897, 7.

94. NSC January 1896, 7.

95. NSC September 1907, 11.

96. NSC December 1896, 8.

97. NSC May 1904, 11.

98. Henry Sell, *Sell's Dictionary of the World's Press* (London: Sell's Advertising Agency, 1887), 12.

99. Clarence Moran, *The Business of Advertising* (London: Methuen & Co., 1905), 3.

without “means of making known their wants.”<sup>100</sup> Stead Jr.’s theory of advertising levelled all publicity, commercial and political: “Those who know anything of political life are well aware of this keen competition to obtain...conspicuous...advertisement.”<sup>101</sup> The levelling argument, it is worth observing, was also iterated in the structural reversal of relations between advertisers and newspapers effected by the new genre of press directories: Advertisers compelled newspapers to advertise in directories, offered essays on key themes of the industry, and most crucially, assumed the position of being the only reliable suppliers of newspaper data, represented as information of public interest that newspapers tried to obscure. If all that was not enough, the public interest argument for advertisements had to be resisted in years that saw the press’s growing association of the concept of “public interest” with what the public wanted, rather than what was paternalistically considered good for it.<sup>102</sup> The task was daunting.

The argument for a public interest in commodities was just one challenge; a branded commodity or service could be part of a broader story of interest to the public. For example, a report about a new theater might mention the decorators,<sup>103</sup> a report about a ship accident mentioned the brand of soaps floating on the water,<sup>104</sup> and a “Ladies Column” on daily gossip noted household brands.<sup>105</sup> The issue would be familiar today under the banner of “product placement,” but the banner already assumes what historically needed substantiation; namely, that there was a way of disentangling advertisements from news within publications.

Legal cases involved businesses as has been noted. Although suspicious, the precise crossing of the line from news reporting to advertising was open to creative interpretation; in one suggestion, it only occurred with the reproduction of the case report after it had first appeared in a newspaper.<sup>106</sup> No less challenging, business was often involved in patriotic and imperial concerns. For example, during the Boer War, the Eiffel Tower Factory asked for a publication of its contribution of 1,000 bottles of Eiffel Tower Lemonade in response to the outcry of soldiers, as it reported, to improve the bad water in South Africa. The company also offered

100. J. B. Williams, “The Early History of London Advertising,” *The Nineteenth Century*, November 1907, 793–800.

101. Stead, *Art of Advertising*, 16.

102. This was one major implication of the rise of the New Journalism. On changing considerations in news selection see, for example, Chalaby, *Invention of Journalism*, 81–84.

103. *NSC* December 1881, 17.

104. *NSC* December 1903, 9.

105. *NSC* December 1884 10.

106. *NSC* January 1906, 12 (suggestion by a member of the Newspaper Society, regarding a dispute of the London General Omnibus Company reported in the *Times*).

discounted concentration to soldiers’ families, and tried to enlist the newspapers, which the circular described as an abuse of public patriotic sentiment.<sup>107</sup> A shoe factory playing on the same sentiments when the First World War began, fared no purchase.<sup>108</sup> Schweppes’s advertising agents asked for a publication of the purchase of a soda water bottle received from the wreck of the Royal George, but at least one newspaper refused;<sup>109</sup> the Khedive of Egypt purchased a Merryweather steam fire engine, but the circular stood firm against the publication of this purchase;<sup>110</sup> the Princess of Denmark was presented with a photography book by F. and R. Speaight at Buckingham, yet a Society member forwarded the piece to Whorlow rather than publish it;<sup>111</sup> and toward the coronation of George V, the “pyrotechnists” Pain and Sons argued that the historic event justified an article on their expertise, to Whorlow’s frustration.<sup>112</sup> Businesses were involved in philanthropic activity, and expected newspaper reports, but the circular resisted; one group of firms attracted the wrath of an active secretary when it sought to publish a “novel combination of charitable effort and commercial enterprise”;<sup>113</sup> Lever Brothers were not encouraged when they wanted publication of their presenting a ton of soap to the poor of Marylebone.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, advertisements were often themselves a public issue. For example, when the London Aquarium advertised the athletic performances of Zaeo in a controversial poster, to the chagrin of the National Vigilance Association, a heated public and regulatory debate ensued; the Aquarium only drew more profits, and the *Star* repeated the wisdom of the circular’s advocacy: “And here again the Aquarium has got two and a quarter column advertisement in the *Times* and a corresponding measure in all the other papers free—gratis.”<sup>115</sup>

The advocacy against free advertisements did not mean that advertisers were unsuccessful; on the contrary, numerous examples revealed that advertisers successfully challenged the boundaries between advertisements and news. Publishing “gratuitous advertisements” and “free puffs” as the circular called them, was standard. The elaborate articulations of the problem only made more glaring the discrepancy between the principle of singling out advertisements by the pecuniary motives of their authors, and the

107. *NSC* April 1900, 12.

108. *NSC* September 1914, 13.

109. *NSC* April 1903, 11.

110. *NSC* February 1894, 7.

111. *NSC* December 1903, 10.

112. *NSC* May 1911, 17.

113. *NSC* December 1885 13.

114. *NSC* February 1894, 7.

115. *Billposter*, November 1890, 279.



Figure 2. A Brinsmead advertisement. Source: *Daily Graphic*, September 2, 1893, 11.

inability to maintain separations in practice. Two main reasons explain the discrepancy. First, it was impossible to hunt down the profit motive for isolated items. Second, the substantive logic was unstable: there was, as advertisers argued, a public interest side to advertisements, and there was also a pecuniary side to news; these facts made it difficult to use the profit motive as a guide to distinction. I will consider the two reasons in turn.

The difficulty of isolating the profit interest could be seen in the 1892 case of *Morris v. Brinsmead*. Brinsmead were piano makers, who appreciated the benefits of advertising (Figure 2).

In the mid-1880s Morris was their advertising agent; he had published not only regular advertisements but also news paragraphs. When not paid for the latter, he sued. His lawyer argued in the opening statement that the contractual arrangement was “to supply notices to the press in the shape of ordinary news, but were really ‘puffs.’” In a letter to Brinsmead, Morris asserted: “As you are aware, the successful results of my unwavering efforts have. . .been most beneficial. . .in securing unusual publicity. . .portraits, memoirs, articles, notices, and flattering paragraphs in every conceivable form. . .”<sup>116</sup> Excerpts from two publications of the kind discussed in the trial are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

116. *Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser for Lancashire, Westmorland, and Yorkshire*, February 3, 1892; *Lloyd's Weekly*, February 7, 1982, 4.

**BRINSMEAD SYMPHONY CONCERTS.**

On Saturday evening last the first of a series of orchestral concerts projected by Messrs John Brinsmead and Sons took place at the St. James's Hall. For some undefined reason the performance in London of orchestral music of a high character has been restricted to the earlier portion of the year, extending over a space of five or six months. At all other times orchestral concerts of a nature consonant with the value of the works performed have been few and far between. Except during the summer, indeed, until quite lately, London had no regular series of orchestral concerts. Believing that the numerous advances which have been made in musical knowledge and education warranted such an enterprise, Messrs Brinsmead organised the Symphony Concerts, of which the first took place on Saturday evening. We need hardly say that any effort in this direction has our heartiest sympathy, which is also deserved by the practical manner in which Messrs Brinsmead have carried out their idea, as regards the comparative lowness of the prices of admission, and the abolition of the usual charges for books of words, annotated programmes, and cloak-room attendance. The result partly of these judicious alterations was the attraction of an audience composed principally of real lovers of music, whose reception of the items in the varied programme was both appreciative and enthusiastic. The programme was well chosen, and excellently adapted to the differing tastes of an average musical audience. It takes amateurs of all shades to fill the St. James's Hall, and, whilst lovers of the classical were not neglected, there was enough and to spare for those who preferred something less severe in style. Beethoven's Fifth Pianoforte Concerto, a work in which, as Sir George Grove says, the composer "reached the very summit of his art, and on which there is only one universal verdict of applause," and Mendelssohn's beautiful overture to *Melusina* were instances of successful catering for the former class; and the procession movement in Moszkowski's symphonic poem "Joan of Arc," and Liszt's First Hungarian Rhapsody were well calculated to delight admirers of modern music. The work the produc-

Figure 3. A Brinsmead "puff paragraph." Source: *Era*, November 14, 1885.

Items of this kind were published without charge in some papers, particularly London dailies such as the *Graphic* and *Illustrated London News*. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, itself implicated in publications of Brinsmead's paragraphs, called the case "The Paragraphist and the Piano Makers," and *Lloyd's Weekly* called it "The Puff Paragraph Case." Titles of this kind bespoke discomfort.<sup>117</sup> The *John Bull* promptly published denials of any

117. For example, *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 3, 1892, 4; and *Lloyd's Weekly*, February 7, 1892, 4.

**BRINSMEAD SYMPHONY CONCERTS.**

Until quite lately—it may be said, indeed, as a rule, until the present year—London during the Winter was without symphony concerts. Sydenham had its excellent Crystal Palace Concerts, But to get to Sydenham, even on a Saturday afternoon, *non cuius contingit*; and London had no regular series of orchestral concerts, except during the Summer—the season alike of the Philharmonic Concerts and of the Concerts directed by Herr Richter. It was to supply this evident want that the Messrs. Brinsmead organised the Concerts of which, under the title of “Brinsmead Symphony Concerts,” the first took place on Saturday evening at St. James’s Hall. The want had, meanwhile, been taken into account by Herr Richter. But of the three Concerts announced for the Autumn by the great German conductor two have already been given; and after the third of the Autumn series of Richter Concerts there will still be three orchestral concerts due to us this Winter from Messrs. Brinsmead.

There was nothing in Saturday’s programme that can be described as new in the absolute sense of the word. But two works were presented, of which neither can yet be regarded as familiar to any large portion of the public. One of these was the Symphony composed by Mr. Ebenezer Prout for the late Birmingham Festival; which gradually is making its way all over England, and which hitherto has produced a favourable impression whenever it has been heard. Dealt with fully on the occasion of its production at Birmingham, Mr. Prout’s Symphony demands at present no particular notice from us, beyond record of the fact that it was performed on Saturday evening under the composer’s direction, and received by a crowded audience with considerable applause. As Mr. W. A. Barrett has well said, in his elaborate analysis of Mr. Prout’s work: “In preferring classical models to others, Mr. Prout has succeeded in showing that it is possible to adopt the restrictions of form without being formal, and that melody is still a powerful and agreeable agent, worthy of being called to the help of the modern musician.”

Figure 4. A Brinsmead “puff paragraph.” Source: *Standard*, November 9, 1885, 4.

connection with Morris.<sup>118</sup> As reports multiplied, and laughter in the court became laughter beyond it, the *Billposter*, a periodical for outdoor advertisers, enjoyed seeing a competing advertising medium in a state of embarrassment.<sup>119</sup>

Things became complicated when Brinsmead, who refused to pay, argued that matters of public interest were customarily published for free, as a complementary aspect of paid advertising. They brought to the stand the cashier of the *Morning Post* who confirmed as much, and were about to call witnesses from the *Times* and the *Daily News* when the

118. *Times*, February 4, 1892, 12; and *Standard*, February 4, 1892, 3.

119. *Billposter*, March 1892, 141.

judge ruled that the evidence was inadmissible.<sup>120</sup> The reason was not clear; an explanation in the *Morning Post*, which obscured its own employee’s testimony, suggested that these were not expert witnesses but rather “men speaking with a respect to a particular office.”<sup>121</sup> Whether that was the precise judicial reasoning or an interested interpretation remains in question.

There was no legal principle that made “puff paragraphs” illegal, as the judge explained to the jury, hence all depended on the contract between Morris and Brinsmead.<sup>122</sup> Morris won the case, and Whorlow gloated in the circular about finally receiving a clear confirmation about the hidden profit: the money did not reach the newspapers, which were asked to acknowledge the public interest in the publications, but it passed between the trader and the agent, revealing the real category of the published material at stake.<sup>123</sup> The case, however, only showed how difficult it was to put a finger on the profit motive for specific published material. The evidence showed that the terms of payment between Morris and Brinsmead were never clear, the jury had a hard time reaching a decision, and, in any case, Morris won less than 25% of his demand (£150 of £637). Whorlow was simplifying a complex picture to suit the circular’s standard warnings against free puffs.

*Morris v. Brinsmead* revealed the tip of the iceberg with regard to the relations of businesses, agencies, and newspapers, which were too complex for the attempt to nail down a profit element that would set advertisements apart. One could see the profit motive nowhere and everywhere: relations involved implicit and explicit conditionings of advertising on news publications, for example, when Kodak suggested that if their “camera notes” were published, a large advertisement would also appear alongside them;<sup>124</sup> more generally, newspapers understood that future business depended on such expectations, and were also involved in a signalling game vis-a-vis other advertisers.<sup>125</sup> These demands were bidirectional, coming from newspapers no less than advertisers, in recognition of the

120. *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, February 3, 1892, 4; *Blackburn Standard and Weekly Express*, February 6, 1892, 5; and *Morning Post*, February 3, 1892, 8.

121. *Morning Post*, February 3, 1892, 8.

122. *Ibid.* A similar position was reported in a case at the Belfast Quarter Sessions, *Northern Whig v. Northern Union Coursing Club*, *NSC* June 1904, 7. In that case the defendants argued that the material for publication was supplied as a news item, but the judge found that they had ordered the publication of an advertisement.

123. *NSC* March 1892, 7–8.

124. *NSC* July 1904, 11. The “supply” of “paragraphs” with advertisements was widely familiar. For example, *NSC* October 1905, 8.

125. For example, *NSC* October 1904, 8.

fuzzy boundary line between news and advertisements. The *Times*, for example, suggested that Colonial news would be more forthcoming with Colonial advertisements.<sup>126</sup> Relations also involved occasional barter, where advertisements were exchanged for commodities. One Society member, who had published a report mentioning the brand of champagne used at the Lord Mayor's banquet, did so only after he received the bottle: "I never expected it...I didn't know what to do with it. I like champagne...I inserted a two-line paragraph...";<sup>127</sup> other barter exchanges were less amused and more systematic. The relations also included conditional payments that depended on the sales generated by the advertisement.<sup>128</sup> Most significantly, there were long-term credit arrangements with both end-advertisers and advertising agencies, which, as Morris admitted in court, "certainly has not lessened" his influence with newspapers.<sup>129</sup> As the *Builder* observed, advertisers got newspaper "notices" which they themselves wrote "by paying a man who is not officially on the staff of the paper, but who has credit with them..."<sup>130</sup>

Isolating the profit motive was not only hopeless within these realities of business relationships, it was also often counterproductive for business. For this reason, the prediction of the *Saturday Review* after *Morris v. Brinsmead*, that "tricks...cease to be useful when they become public property" was simple optimism.<sup>131</sup> Unsurprisingly, a consistent position of the Society was that "they were not a trades union"; the Society's function was to disseminate information and give advice, not to enforce a uniform practice that did not fit the competitive newspaper market.<sup>132</sup> The circular advocated ideals that were breached by consent.<sup>133</sup>

Alongside the realities of business relationships that complicated the pecuniary view, the logic of this view was unstable: there was a public interest side to advertisements, and there was a pecuniary side to news.

126. Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876–1922* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), 122 (letter from C. F. Moberly Bell, manager of the *Times*).

127. NSC August 1905, 7.

128. The same could be true in the relationship between traders and agents. For example, NSC March 1906, 15.

129. *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, February 7, 1892, 4.

130. *Builder*, February 6, 1892, in *Billposter*, March 1892, 145.

131. *Saturday Review*, in *Billposter*, March 1892, 145

132. Douglas Straight, of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the Society's president, The Society's Annual Trade Conference, NSC June 1904, 10.

133. For a study of the influence of interdependencies on the circulation of texts concerning Victorian shows of living foreign people, see Sadiyah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), ch. 2.



The substantive argument of advertisers was not without merit. Public life hinged on economic life, and there was no obvious way to explain how it could *not* bleed into news. Some publications seemed to gradually move from one category to another. For example, reports about the financial condition and business successes of companies increasingly shifted from paid advertising to news, a process some commentators were amazed to see accepted complacently.<sup>134</sup> Companies, however, expectedly insisted that information about their businesses was “for the benefit of... readers.”<sup>135</sup> Sports items were also a matter of debate, with some papers treating them as advertisements, and many others treating them as news.<sup>136</sup> Political and economic concerns were hopelessly mixed in government advertising, which preoccupied the Society. Governmental departments required official and unofficial material to be published, for which they were not keen to pay, claiming a public interest. In discussing the question at the annual conference of 1888, the Society’s then-President, Francis Hewitt of the *Leicester Daily Post*, admitted: “Between what is undoubtedly news and what are undoubtedly advertisements there is a very wide field of public information, where newspaper proprietors interpret their duties according to their interests.”<sup>137</sup> It should come as small surprise that newspapers were especially willing to allow Colonial governmental advertisers to have a say about news columns which dealt with their colonies, as Simon Potter observes.<sup>138</sup>

Whorlow tried to formulate more complex indications, which were amusingly circular, assuming the naturalness of the distinction between advertisements and news, and finally reverting to the search for profit as the ultimate guide: “[I]t is not sufficient, in endeavouring the guard against the advertisement pirate, merely to keep a sharp look out for personal allusions, but a distinction must be drawn between those allusions which come naturally where news is inserted upon its merits, and those which are artfully contrived for the purpose of hoodwinking the unwary editor. A good serviceable test to apply in all doubtful cases would be to consider whether the suspected matter was calculated, either directly or indirectly, to prevent or diminish legitimate paid for advertising.”<sup>139</sup>

134. *NSC* December 1901, 8.

135. *NSC* March 1905, 11.

136. *NSC* November 1907, 10 (a local paper refused to print details of a high profile golf tournament as news, only to find that most dailies and weeklies published them).

137. *NSC* June 1888, 6. See also *NSC* August 1888, 27–28, for the Society’s failed efforts to legislatively compel local governments to advertise in local newspapers.

138. Potter, *News and the British World*, ch. 5.

139. *NSC* January 1893, 10; see also *NSC* October 1895, 7.

The dangers of “suspected matter” assumed radical proportions in cases that would today be classified as “fake news,” in which the conceptual instability of the pecuniary view became manifest. Thefts and fires were invented to advertise safes; a murder was made up to advertise milk; a report of a drowned body in the Thames turned out to be an invention of the advertisers of the watch allegedly found on the body; and an accident of the Lord Mayor’s carriage was fictionalized just outside an aspiring silver shop.<sup>140</sup> More challenging still were cases that we might call “manufactured news,” which confused any sense of reality. Theaters, which by definition operated in these zones of incoherence, were leaders in the field. In 1910, Frank Curzon, manager of the Prince of Wales Theatre, was responsible for one of these.

In the so-called “matinee hat incident,” Blanche Eardley and a friend came to a matinee performance wearing large hats; as the *New York Times* reported, hers was “nearly one yard wide, and her friend’s even larger.”<sup>141</sup> Matinee hats in theaters attracted hostility, which was particularly vocal in the 1890s when the hats debate became something akin to a gender war.<sup>142</sup> They were widely caricatured, as in the example from *Judy* shown in [Figure 5](#).

Eardley said that they had intended to take off the hats, but before they sat down, a man behind them cried “Take off those ridiculous hats.” Eardley refused, and the man soon continued, “Are you going to take off those absurd hats?” The audience grew excited; Eardley responded that she would not because of the man’s rudeness. The man called Curzon, who asked Eardley to take off the hat. She refused and, after an argument, Curzon would not let her return to the stalls. She published a letter that explained that she was establishing her right as a woman to keep her head covered. Curzon responded that he would not allow the vindication of rights of women at the expense of the peace and comfort of his audience, and Eardley soon sued him for assault, claiming that he had physically held her back. The *Times* reported the proceedings with all the theatrical detail. Witnesses disagreed about the assault. The magistrate eventually acquitted Curzon: “It was obviously impossible for any one to get a view who sat behind the hat she was wearing. People who went to the

140. Respectively: *NSC* January 1883, 8; *NSC* January 1889, 2–3; *NSC* August 1889, 23; and *NSC* January 1892, 34.

141. *New York Times*, April 10, 1910, C3.

142. For example, *Morning Post*, November 19, 1897, 2; *Era*, December 15, 1900, 11; *Funny Folks*, May 28, 1892, 171; *Dart*, March 31, 1899, 11; *Punch*, February 15, 1896, 76; *Punch*, January 1, 1898, 301; and *Punch*, April 4, 1896. On the context of the matinee see Susan Torrey Barstow, “‘Hedda Is All of Us’: Late-Victorian Women at the Matinee,” *Victorian Studies* 43 (2001): 387–411.



A PLEA FOR THE MATINEE HAT.

*“Those people in the stalls behind us were growling awfully ‘cause they couln’t see the stage for your hat, Dollie.”*  
*“Stupid things! There was nothing on the stage half so much worth looking at.”*

Figure 5. Press  
ridicule of the  
matinee hat. Source:  
*Judy*, March 31,  
1897, 155.

theatre must behave reasonably.” The decision was received with applause in the court.<sup>143</sup>

The episode was notorious; strangely, it was often memorialized as if it had ended there, when in fact it had not. A few months later, one Thomas Lumley Dann and his wife Ethele sued Curzon for failing to pay them for “carrying out the adventure.”<sup>144</sup> It turned out that the incident was, as contemporaries described it, an advertisement: “Nobody knew how amusing the matinee hat case was until Mr. Curzon explained that the hat, and the lady, and the lady’s husband were all actors in a ‘put-up job.’”<sup>145</sup> The entire interaction, including the assault charges, were orchestrated by Dann as “an excellent advertisement both for the theatre and for the

143. *Times*, April 16, 1910, 6.

144. *Dann v. Curzon*, 104 LT (1910), 66, 67.

145. *Saturday Review*, October 29, 1910, 535.

defendant himself as manager.”<sup>146</sup> Ethele Dann acted as Eardley’s friend. An advertiser had finally confirmed traditional suspicions that courts were being used as advertising media; Curzon turned familiar caricatures into a dramatized reality.<sup>147</sup>

Curzon admitted the setup, but denied the promise to pay. The courts were offended: The Westminster County Court, in which Dann’s suit was first litigated, would not enforce the contract, yet made Curzon pay his own costs in criticism of his conduct. The *Saturday Review* was curious about the next round: “How far you can carry a joke has never yet been decided by a superior court.”<sup>148</sup> Not very far: Curzon and Dann both appealed to the King’s Bench and lost, in what became a contract casebook reference. A contract to bring a case into court merely for advertisement was against public policy, and was therefore unenforceable. The court essentially defined the event as unreal: Whether Curzon had or had not touched Blanche, there was no assault, because it was done with the ladies’ consent. The Criminal Court was therefore asked to adjudicate something which “to the knowledge of the parties had not happened.”<sup>149</sup>

Something had happened, of course. At first sight, the entire episode would seem an extreme example of the dangers of advertisers. However, as the *Penny Illustrated Paper* suggested, it could lead to a questioning of the status of news per se. A comic piece explored the “wonderful possibilities” that Curzon’s publicity stunt suggested. The piece featured interviews with a list of characters, among them an “Amy Shortcash,” who argues that the £1,500 worth of jewellery on her was an advertising scheme; and a “D S Windell,” who tells the reporter that his fraudulent banking was an advertisement treated ungenerously.<sup>150</sup> Just as advertisements could make news, it was implied, news events could dissolve into advertisements, especially if they were motivated by an interest in money. This option was no less troubling. The critique suggested that the omnipresent profit motive was a cause of confusion rather than distinction.

146. *Times*, October. 25, 1910, 4.

147. For example, *Pearson’s Weekly* printed a fictionalized scene of an advertiser-defendant who pleads the court to “pitch into” him so that reporters could hear. “‘Good gracious!’ Thundered the magistrate as a frightful idea struck him. ‘is it possible you have the audacity to use the machinery of the court as an advertising dodge?’ ‘That’s it!... I made the complaint myself. These hard times a man must advertise himself.’” *Pearson’s Weekly*, November 24, 1904, 3.

148. *Ibid.*

149. *Dann v. Curzon*, 27 TLR (1911), 163, 164; 55 Solic. J. & Wkly. Rep. 189; 104 LT (1910), 66, 68 (Justice Phillimore); and *Times*, December 21, 1910, 3.

150. *Penny Illustrated Paper*, October 29, 1910, 554.

This was a problem embedded, as has been discussed, in the business structures of the commercial press. It received cultural expression in no lesser a figure than Jack the Ripper. The Ripper was the mysterious perpetrator of a series of murders and body mutilations of London East End prostitutes between August and November 1888.<sup>151</sup> His pseudonym was coined in a letter known as “Dear Boss,” which the Central News Agency claimed to have received on September 27, 1888, and handed to the Scotland Yard. The letter was the second alleged communication to have reached the police; it would usher in a flood of letters, eventually numbering more than 200, across Britain, which made for the Ripper’s mythology. Published by the police as part of the investigation, “Dear Boss” was exciting news; the writer taunted the investigators, as the media and public were doing, for failing to catch him; he claimed that he was “down on whores and . . .shan’t quit ripping them” until caught; he used red ink because the “proper red stuff” (blood) he had collected “went thick like glue”; and he promised to “clip the lady’s ears off” on his next “job.” Another communication shortly handed by the Central News Agency referred to a “double event,” and was also published. Earlobe mutilation (of Catherine Eddowes) and double murder (Eddowes and Elizabeth Stride) had just materialized, giving possible credence to the two letters. However, some police officials and journalists theorized that the letters were written by a journalist seeking to increase newspaper sales.<sup>152</sup> Because news items were fully commodified market products, journalists could be described as advertisers of their own products; according to this understanding, the categorization of any journalistic publication would defy an either/or choice between news and advertisement. The incoherent advertisements/news boundary became mixed up with the aura of horrific mystery surrounding the Whitechapel murders.<sup>153</sup> And the so-called “enterprising journalist” theory lives on; recently, a forensic linguistics analysis provided new possible support for; it received wide media coverage in fake-news terms, amusing in its sensationalist tones given the history of this phenomenon.<sup>154</sup>

151. The list of victims, and earlier and later possibilities, has never been settled.

152. For a review of sources, see Paul Begg, *Jack the Ripper: The Definitive History* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2005).

153. Mixture was omnipresent: *Punch* speculated that theater poster advertisements that featured crime scenes were indebted to the Whitechapel murders, *Billposter*, October 1888, 43, and also speculated that these advertisements led to crime, *Billposter*, November 1888, 53.

154. The analysis supports the hypothesis that the two famous letters were by the same author, and suggests that they were likely linked to a third letter that some believe to have originated with the Central News Agency. Andrea Nini, “An Authorship Analysis of

The implication with capitalist profit across all elements of the newspaper press was captured poignantly in John Ruskin's efforts to disengage from it. He had famously declared he would not advertise his writings; in 1872, he explained the power of individual actions of that kind to check capitalist commerce; books, he continued, should be read by advice and not advertisement; book reviews were no better, for they were paid-for opinions. Ruskin was determined to disengage from newspapers. He then went on to wonder how his readers might learn of his critical work if they had no one to advise them; failing an ideal world of lists of worthy literature created by impartial volunteers, Ruskin fell back on sending copies of his publications to the newspapers, but refusing to pay for advertisements.<sup>155</sup> Just over a year later, he admitted that that position was inconsistent, and decided not to send free copies to newspapers any longer.<sup>156</sup>

If newspapers were to resist the conclusion that Ruskin had reached, which saw them as fully contaminated by profit, a theory of substantive difference had to complement the inherent suspicion of advertisers. The professionalist view, examined in the next section, came to the rescue in such moments.

### *In Search of a Professional Ideal*

The professionalist view was necessary not only at the margins of advertising inventiveness that led to fake news, but also at the center: As often as advertisers wanted free publication of items that they argued were news, they were happy to pay for them, and essentially sought to leverage their monied position to have a say about news content. It was in fact easy to complain about advertisers who refused to pay for valuable material submitted for publication, or who fabricated stories, but the situation was more challenging when they did not, because newspaper owners were experiencing loss of control over their properties. Here, there was no need to uncover the profit motive: it was plainly admitted by willingness to pay, and newspapers were getting their share. Because the profit motive cut both ways, when newspapers resisted, they had to articulate alternative ideals.

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the Jack the Ripper Letters," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2018), <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1093/llc/fqx065> (accessed June 20, 2019). The "enterprising" terminology originates in the 1910 memoirs of Robert Anderson, Assistant Commissioner of the Scotland Yard; Robert Anderson, *The Lighter Side of My Official Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 138.

155. John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, vol. 1 (London: George Allen, 1902), Letter 21, August 1872.

156. John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen, 1900), Letter 38, December 1873.

The professionalist view suggested that advertisers should not influence news and editorial content (formal presentation and arrangement included), because news involved a unique knowledge generated by professionals in journalism. The view adopted an informational ideal of veracity, and saw news as (ideally) unbiased, unlike advertisements. This position elevated news while retaining advertising as an unredeemed category.

Ideals of journalism, it should be clarified, were being debated in a broader context; in particular, the shift in emphasis from “views” to “news” and the emerging cult, as Mark Hampton called it, of facts and impartiality, were considered in the context of newspapers’ role in an expanding democracy.<sup>157</sup> What follows examines the uses of ideals of professionalism to meet challenges posed by advertising content, and to frame advertising. The conceptual language developed in debates about the relationship of the press to political consciousness and freedom from state control could only be shifted to the distinction between news and advertising content with some conscious deliberation about its applicability; at the very least, the meaning of bias and of independence in each context needed elaboration, yet that element was missing. The substantive assumption of difference that animated the professionalist view was typically asserted rather than shown. Contradicted by the practices of the industry, its power—which is not to be underestimated—was largely rhetorical. Formal indications of advertisements within newspapers, and separations in functions, were stand-ins for the asserted substantive difference between news and advertisements. However, the difficulties of maintaining them repeatedly questioned the implied hierarchy of publication types.

The circular expressed concerns for the independence of newspapers on a regular basis. Challenges to independence from advertisers came in various forms. For one, advertisers sent orders for paid material, which explicitly dictated avoiding distraction. Here, for example, was an instruction from Sell’s advertising agency:

To be set in reading matter type. Position to be immediately following and alongside of, or amongst, pure reading matter; and no word advertisement, or any contraction thereof, must be added to it.<sup>158</sup>

Advertisers made these requirements regularly. *Advertising: A Monthly Journal for Every Advertiser* offered as expert advice that “[a] carefully worded

157. Hampton, *Visions of the Press*, 81. See also Chalaby, *Invention of Journalism*, 79–80, on the rise of information as the press’s main business. See also Kennedy Jones’s proximately contemporary assessments of claims to independence by the press, in *Fleet Street and Downing Street* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1920).

158. NSC April 1887, 27.

‘next-to, or amongst reading matter’ announcement is always effective.”<sup>159</sup> Newspapers often complied; they needed advertisers, and “after reading matter” advertisements often paid better than cover ones.<sup>160</sup> Such contracts were enforced when they reached the courts, as they occasionally did.<sup>161</sup>

Judicial tolerance could be seen at its limits when readers were deceived by paid editorial columns: “If you had sat here and heard the statements of widows who have parted with their money entirely on the strength of these paragraphs, your heart would have guided you as to what was right to do in the future.”<sup>162</sup> This was Alderman Green at the Guildhall Police Court, losing his patience with a witness from the advertising agency of Gibbs, Smith and Co. in a litigation that became known as the “Press Opinions” case. Thomas Tarrant was a fraudulent stockbroker who expanded his business with the aid of editorial endorsements obtained through his agents. The editorials congratulated the firm for “good profits,” under titles such as “Knowledge Is Power.” They were paid items, charged by the agency at 25% more than regular advertisements. Unlike cases in which only traders and their advertising agents were implicated, here the judges were troubled by the march of defrauded readers in court; by the time the case reached the Old Bailey, the practice of paid editorials was described as a scandal.<sup>163</sup> Judicial moral warnings fed into the professionalist view.

Fraud cases such as *Tarrant* called attention to the basis of belief. Whorlow warned newspapers that the journalistic voice could induce readers to risk their money. Paragraphs of that kind required “knowledge which justifies the endorsement of their contents.”<sup>164</sup> In the *Tarrant* case, one editor testified: “It never struck me that the object was to represent that it was our independent opinion.” Another, however, admitted that the item was “full of the editorial ‘we.’”<sup>165</sup> Such practices were rampant, as were

159. *Advertising*, May 1893, 460. The article preferred that the reader should be given some indication that the matter was an advertisement, but admitted that the question was controversial.

160. For example, testimony of the advertisement manager of the *English Illustrated Magazine*, Old Bailey Proceedings Online, Oct. 1901, trial of John Nicholson and Henry Thomas Richards (t19011021-728).

161. For example, *NSC* April 1904, 10 (*Walter Judd, Ltd. v. Longstreths, Ltd.*, the City of London Court).

162. *Daily News*, October 22, 1897, 3.

163. *NSC* October 1897, 9; *NSC* December 1897, 6–7; Old Bailey Proceedings Online, October 1897, trial of Thomas Tarrant and Stephen Henry Fry (t18971025-709a); *Morning Post*, November 5, 1897, 7; and *Standard*, September 28, 1897, 6. For another example of judicial commentary on the danger of defrauding readers who mistake advertisements for editorials see *NSC* February 1907, 15 (a stockbroker case).

164. *NSC* April 1899, 8.

165. Trial of Thomas Tarrant.



criticisms.<sup>166</sup> Interestingly, in the days of the advertisement duty, the Revenue wanted to tax editorial columns that endorsed brands. The Society was resistant, as newspapers had been to all positions of the Revenue that were later repeated, yet, acknowledging the presence of the profit motive in newspapers' own practices, the Circular also wondered if in that case taxation did not serve as "protection against ourselves."<sup>167</sup>

References to "independence," and the different kind of knowledge guaranteed by journalism, were taken as self-explanatory when asserted in relation to advertising. "[T]hat independence which is the proud characteristic of English journalism" was a self-congratulating account that started with an obviousness having little to do with the challenges of advertising, and then turned to face them.<sup>168</sup>

Advertisers' interests were assumed to be an inherent taint. One editor received an order from International Plasmon (food sellers), which required an advertisement to be "preceded by at least five inches of unpaid reading matter, and not divided from news. . . Market and Sporting Items. . . are not regarded as reading matter within the meaning of our order." The editor wrote to the Society about the "unblushing impudence"; he considered placing the order in the wastepaper basket—the ultimate insult with which newspapers' personnel could treat advertising orders<sup>169</sup>—but first answered the advertiser "Your order. . . we consider an insult to any self-respecting newspaper. . ."<sup>170</sup> Why that was so was too obvious to explain. Newspapers' insistence on independence was often discussed in the language of a natural order: "a singular reversal of the order of things is brought about, and newspaper proprietors, and editors, abrogate their proper functions in favour of the advertising agents."<sup>171</sup>

Advertisers were adept at internalizing critique, and could turn the problem itself to use, as one Christchurch paper suggested: A piece titled "Crooked Ways of Advertising" featured a complaint about misleading

166. Another example is the debates about proprietary medicine advertising through editorial endorsements in the professional (medical) as well as the popular press. *Report from the Select Committee on Patent Medicines*, 1914.

167. *NSC* of 1847, referring to editorial endorsements of Holloway Pills, quoted in *NSC* December 1913, 17.

168. *NSC* January 1893, 13.

169. For a parade of Society members boasting their use of the wastepaper basket against seekers of free advertisements see *NSC* June 1909, 2–3.

170. *NSC* July 1906, 10.

171. *NSC* January 1904, 11 (in this case, a "Special Inquiry" into Wills's advertising agency management of advertisements of the Great Western Railway; the hundreds of replies from newspapers to the inquiry spoke to the sense of increasing pressure, yet owners were reluctant to take concerted action. *NSC* February 1904, 8–10).

**THE GAME OF BUSINESS.**

**H. GORDON SELFRIDGE**  
and tells Readers

**edits a page of "P. I. P." how he Succeeded.**



[This page of "P. I. P." is edited by the founder and managing Director using his name. He died nearly four years ago, Selfridge went at first with but most public support, and dismal prophecies of failure were heard on all sides. But the indomitable energy and the business genius of Mr. H. Gordon Selfridge triumphed over all obstacles, and the great building in Oxford Street is now one of London's chief shopping centres. Something like 3,000 people are employed here, and not one of them, it may safely be said, works harder than the managing director, whose hours of labour are many more than the eight which so many people think should be the limit. To Mr. Selfridge, however, business is a pleasure, and in that fact lies, no doubt, one of the secrets of his phenomenal success.]

H. GORDON SELFRIDGE.

and nerve might give a man undesirable ideas; but with it he is not only a better citizen, but a better business man into the bargain.

Vivility is another quality to be enumerated, and it is the twin brother of energy. With it a man never knows when he is beaten, and I regard it as a typical quality of the Briton. When I was in business in America I always felt I had a prize when I took an Englishman into my employ, and I may state here that almost the whole of the people we employ in Oxford Street are English, in spite of certain rumours to the contrary.

Business should be regarded, as I have said, as a game—a game which is played from the love of it rather than from necessity. It is infinitely the best game there is in the world; knowledge of it is essential to success, and there is no royal road to that knowledge, which can be attained alone by attention to detail. And it must ever be borne in mind that the players in this game must base their efforts on the unshakable rock of integrity,

Figure 6. Selfridge combining advertisements and editorials. Source: *Penny Illustrated Paper*, March 15, 1913, 11.

editorials, only to end as itself an advertisement for Waterbury watches.<sup>172</sup> There was no end to creativity. Advertisers such as Gordon Selfridge combined, as the Circular put it, editorials and advertisements in new ways, as can be seen, for example, in Figures 6 and 7.

The circular hesitated in the face of sophisticated forces: The “new system of combining advertisements with editorial matter... although... may be harmless within reasonable bounds... a line ought to be drawn.”<sup>173</sup> Short of obvious fraud, the way to draw the line remained unspecified. The codependencies of newspapers and advertisers were such that all had an interest in rhetorically arguing for separations, without ever elaborating implications too sharply.

That said, paid material in news and editorial columns were the least of the challenges for the professionalist view. Functions themselves were often mixed. Within newspapers, a single person could be both a reporter and an advertisement canvasser; this was unsurprising given patterns of employment, which, below the editor and possibly sub-editor, were often

172. *Billposter*, October 1890, 250.

173. NSC December 1911, 14. The challenge was part of Selfridge's broader strategy, which, as Elizabeth Outka shows, sought to elevate the meaning of commerce and consumption. Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism and the Commodified Authentic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch. 4.

## LONDON'S GREATEST STORE.

I.

### SELFRIDGE'S AND ITS ORIGIN.

No one passing along Oxford-street during the course of the last 12 months can have failed to observe the clearing away of old small houses and the rising growth of a great four-square building which now stands architecturally complete on a site just west of *The Times* Book Club, and almost facing the Bond-street Station of the Central London Tube Railway. The building constitutes a handsome addition to the architectural features of London, and for size and completeness the erection of these premises at Nos. 398 to 422, Oxford-street creates a building record not only for London but for the whole world, not even excepting the United States. On March 15th, within a year of the first beginning of the work, the doors will be open, and the business for which it has been erected by Mr. Gordon Selfridge, well known as a former partner of the Marshall Field Store at Chicago, the largest retail shop in America, will begin. "Selfridge's" in Oxford-street will be the London edition of that gigantic institution. What that is to the United States, Selfridge's will be to Great Britain—the greatest "dry goods store" (to use that term for lack of a better) in the United Kingdom.

Among West-end business men the opening of Selfridge's is being awaited with the very keenest curiosity, and the interest of the public at large will be not less aroused when, on March 15th, Selfridge's comes to full birth and being. It is not merely that Selfridge's will

States there is no place between the small circle of millionaire society and the active business men, fully immersed and engaged in the conduct of some great corporation or firm. Between the two, the man who has retired at a comparatively early age, still full of life and energy, finds himself cast into loneliness, and removed from active contact with his fellows, though ambition and energy are still keen within him.

It was in that situation, inspired by the desire for an outlet for his energies and the distaste for mere idleness that Mr. Gordon Selfridge determined to carry out the business undertaking which is shortly to be realized by the opening of "Selfridge's" in London. Here again may be noted an essential and most interesting difference between the English and the American attitude towards business. In England while respect is paid to the professions *qua* professions, business is still regarded as no more than a matter of money-getting, as a means only justified by its results. In the United States business is ranked as fully the equal of law, medicine, or the arts, and the head of a big firm is no less absorbed in and devoted to the conduct of his business than is a barrister to his law, a doctor to his patients, or an artist to his pictures. Given that environment it followed that Mr. Selfridge would seek that outlet for his activities in business with which all his efforts had been previously allied.

**The Fascination of London.**

As a man who had retired from the management of America's greatest store, the United States

Figure 7. Selfridge combining advertisements and editorials. Source: *Times*, February 23, 1909, 4.

precarious: causal or freelance, and given an absence of professional entry requirements.<sup>174</sup> In small newspapers owners covered multiple functions. The diaries of Anthony Hewitson, who had been the owner of the *Preston Chronicle* and later the *Wakefield Herald*, include entries like

174. Lee, *Origins of the Popular Press*, 104–17. Labor organization of journalists began slowly in 1900, with the first national union founded in 1907. Training began in the 1880s, but was both limited and discouraged by low wage levels.

this one, from 1872: “Was out nearly all day getting advertisements for paper. Sub-editing at night till 10.”<sup>175</sup> Functions were also unstable, with new ones developing rapidly; the “press agent,” as Dann (from the matinee hat affair) was defined, was one of “these enterprising intermediaries” who puzzled the Society.<sup>176</sup> If only “the Press rigidly held aloof from all such discreditable schemes, the ‘publicity agent’ would soon die of inanition,” Whorlow fantasized after Dann’s next attempt at news making, this time with an invented poor boy-protégé, and a violinist as client.<sup>177</sup> The professional journalist would not create such confusion. These positions were ironic, because newspaper owners were largely responsible for the ever-receding liberal ideals of professionalism, which required conditions that secured independence from managerial and owner control (choice, remuneration, job security, status).<sup>178</sup> The circular was essentially redirecting criticism levelled at newspapers themselves for failing to meet these ideals. And even if journalists’ professional definition had been better circumscribed, expanding work with advertising agencies complicated matters, because they too combined operations, and proposed to supply news with advertisements. As Terry Nevett noted, news and advertisements supplies were closely interrelated.<sup>179</sup>

In December 1896, the circular reported a new “per contra” system: An advertising agent offered newspapers a service of news at fixed rates for fixed periods, and guaranteed a quantity of advertisements to offset the cost of the news. Newspapers refusing to take the news were denied the advertisements, and some succumbed to the pressure. Whorlow warned against the loss of independence, which he saw as a forgone conclusion in France. The appetites of advertisers, Palmer was warning, only

175. Diary of Anthony Hewitson, March 21, 1872, Lancashire Archives, DP512/1/5. On November 21, 1872, he wrote: “Office work in morning; in afternoon out collecting advertisements; in evening writing for Chronicle till 10.30.” I am grateful to Andrew Hobbs for sharing these extracts with me.

176. NSC January 1911, 15. Nevett noted a new type of agent in the early twentieth century who streamlined editorial puffs under the euphemistic title of “reading-notices.” Terry Nevett, “Advertising and Editorial Integrity in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Press in English Society from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Michal Harris and Alan Lee (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), 161.

177. NSC August 1912, 16.

178. Lee, *Origins of the Popular Press*, ch. 4. On debates about the definition of a “journalist” and the inclusionary use of the term in the late nineteenth century, see Mark Hampton, “Defining Journalists in Late-Nineteenth Century Britain,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22 (2005): 138–55; on the difficulties of professionalization in journalism, see Mark Hampton, “Journalists and the ‘Professional Ideal’ in Britain: The Institute of Journalists, 1884–1907,” *Historical Research* 72 (1999): 183–201.

179. Nevett, “Advertising and Editorial Integrity,” 160–61.

grew.<sup>180</sup> Palmer argued in 1897 that encroachments on news and editorial columns were comparatively new, apparently not having read the circular of the last decade and a half too attentively, but Whorlow agreed that the problem grew more daunting. The Society convened a meeting of the provincial dailies to discuss “per contra” offers, realizing in retrospect that this was too narrow a group: London papers too were facing increasing pressure from advertisers. It condemned the system, and highlighted the risk to independence, the unfair basis for placing advertisements, and the danger of mixing news with “puffs.” However, as in other cases, the meeting declined to take concerted action.<sup>181</sup> Episodes kept arising.<sup>182</sup>

An additional element, which vocal spokesmen of newspapers were not as keen to flag, was that news suppliers also played on the opacity of distinctions. The rise of New Journalism itself reflected an appeal to styles associated with advertising as a mode of news reporting, and to contents that took a broad account of popular interest, so that claims about the greater vulgarity of the advertiser, of the kind that Palmer was making with many others, were increasingly something of a misnomer.<sup>183</sup> At the same time, burgeoning news agencies were quick to realize that the profits of blurred boundaries could flow their way. In September 1913, a manager at *Reuters*’ advertising department approached advertisers with an offer: If they shifted their business to *Reuters*, “it would enable [*Reuters*] to make representations to the newspapers for extended editorial reference to [the advertiser’s] interests,” which would be a better use of money in both Britain and Australia. *Reuters* was in a position to persuade papers to “open their columns more readily” and offer advertisers more free publicity, it was promised.

The offer was not a novelty, but it was blunt enough, and economically significant enough, to cause a commotion.<sup>184</sup> Advertising agencies, chief among them Street and Co., which the Circular flagged for years for their efforts to obtain “disguised” advertisements, jumped to protect the inviolability of newspapers.<sup>185</sup> They immediately notified the Newspaper

180. See text accompanying note 68.

181. *NSC* December 1896, 3; *NSC* January 1897, 3–4; and *NSC* February 1897, 7.

182. See Nevett’s account of a vocal controversy about editorial “puffs” for cars in exchange for booking advertising space in 1907–1908. Nevett, “Advertising and Editorial Integrity,” 157–59.

183. On New Journalism, see note 57.

184. For a similar tension with *Central News*, see *NSC* April 1908, 11; and *NSC* May 1908, 12. See also *NSC* August 1909, 12, for another complaint, recalling the decision against the per-contra system.

185. Here was one criticism of Street in the circular: “Street and Co., Ltd.—This name as associated with the whole art of exploiting the free editorial puff. . .continue year after year—decade after decade. . .” *NSC* February 1907, 15.

Society, passed resolutions against the injury to the “prestige...of the Press,” and called on newspapers to limit the activities of news agencies to news. If the method continued, agents warned as if they had not invented it, “the impartiality and authenticity of the columns of the newspapers no longer exist.”<sup>186</sup> The *Times* protested that newspapers could not be influenced in any case, but called on *Reuters* for an explanation.<sup>187</sup> Baron de Reuter had to minimize damages, and promptly wrote to the Society. He insisted that his “News Agency is...wholly dissevered from and independent of all financial undertakings or influences whatever.” The manager who wrote the letter may have been “a little exuberant in some passages” but ultimately the meaning was distorted; it was an “unfortunate phraseology,” de Reuter wrote, and no future confusion would arise.<sup>188</sup>

Nothing could have spoken to the difficulties of differentiating news from advertisements more clearly than the fluidity of all roles: A news agency offering advertising as news; advertising agencies that often challenged the distinctions shocked at the affront to newspapers’ integrity; a newspaper denying that anything of the kind could happen despite its own practices, and after years of reporting these happenings in the circular; and, finally, two figures, an advertiser (in *Reuters*) who wrote plainly, and a self-appointed news agent (de Reuter himself) who fudged the meaning of words.

The *Times* was unimpressed with the interpretive turn that de Reuter took, which did not “show any appreciation of the real *gravamen* of the charge.” Letters were flowing in from agencies and newspapers, speaking to the rampant practices of mixing advertisements and news. The *Times* concluded that it was time to escalate its position; it announced that “no advertisements will be accepted from agencies which supply news, or vice versa. We shall regard every agency as fulfilling one function or the other, but not both.” The heading was emphatic (Figure 8).

The *Times* soon declared, to avoid misconceptions about its editorial independence, that it would also refuse requests for editorial notices from advertising agents; traders and companies who wanted to have their announcements considered had to contact the city editor directly.<sup>189</sup>

The strategy of the *Times* was in line with a general trend to assert separations between news and advertisements by relying on formal rather than substantive grounds, while taking the substantive assumption of difference

186. Some agencies responded in a similar fashion to the threat of the “per contra” system. *NSC* January 1897, 3–4; and *NSC* February 1897, 7.

187. *Times*, October 25, 1913, 9.

188. *NSC* November 1913, 10.

189. *Times*, November 12, 1913, 15. The *Times* would start using *Reuters*’ services much later, in 1958.

[COMP: Please delete rule above.]

ATTITUDE OF “THE TIMES.”

NO CONFUSION POSSIBLE IN  
FUTURE.

Figure 8. The *Times* committing to stricter separations between advertisements and news. Source: *Times*, October 29, 1913, 8.

for granted. It was actually similar to de Reuter’s justification, which relied on the logic of functional separations within his agency, only taking it one step further. Assertions of difference, which formal separations were supposed to manifest, in fact depended on them.

Formal separations had another merit. The process of depreciating advertisements was risky: newspapers could not delegitimize advertising completely without undermining their own financial viability, and legitimacy; if they were not careful they would have to stop publishing advertisements, or assume responsibility to screen their contents, neither of which they could afford. One of the ways to hold the stick from both ends was to rely on the respectability of the advertising agent. The implication was a division of labor: if advertisers kept to their sections, the assumption was that a serious agent provided some guarantee that the advertisements were, within the limits of their genre, legitimate.

In some instances, reliance on agencies was not enough. When the editor of *Judy* was convicted in 1907 for knowingly publishing an indecent advertisement, the *Tribune* announced that it was “as anxious to ensure the clean, bona-fide nature of its advertisements as it is anxious to ensure the accuracy of its news” and would apply screening processes to exclude fraudulent or offensive advertisements. Whorlow worried: “when it comes to enquiring into the motives of advertisers, where is it possible to draw a line?”<sup>190</sup> The general rule, he assured members in the following year, “is to assume their [advertisers] genuineness unless the announcements bear upon the face of them unmistakable evidence of fraud or illegality.” The reason was the standard suspicion of advertisers embedded in the self-definition of the newspaper press: “The whole system of trade advertising is to a large extent made up of exaggeration and puffery, and it has never been looked upon as the duty of the newspapers to act as advertisement

190. *NSC* January 1907, 10–11.

censors in regard to taste or strict veracity.”<sup>191</sup> A division of labor reliant on the “credible firm” could affirm advertising’s inferiority, and yet keep it within the bounds of legitimacy.<sup>192</sup>

The process of legitimization through advertising agencies was paralleled by professionalization in the advertising industry itself. The same years saw the rise of advertising agencies’ and advertising managers’ associations, clubs and syndicates, courses, advice books, and professional magazines, which increasingly standardized the field, and turned it into an area of technical expertise and specialist study, in the process distinguishing between legitimate and competent, and illegitimate and incompetent, advertising, and between respectable and unrespectable agents.<sup>193</sup>

Assertions of formal boundaries unified newspapers’ responses to the challenge of differentiating news from advertisements. Divisions of labor between advertising and journalism, and a flagging of the difference to readers through formal marks of type, heading, and location in newspapers, were necessary to assert the superiority of news. However, the levels of separations varied. For many, the new policies of the *Times*, which some other newspapers reportedly adopted, were too much. The Executive Committee of the Society convened to discuss the *Reuters* affair. It published a detailed report in the (confidential) circular, which ultimately sought to calm things down and retain a level of messiness that the *Times* wanted cleared up. The committee proposed a distinction between news and editorial columns, calling to its aid a long-standing debate about the relative place of values and facts in journalism, and bringing it to bear on the problem of advertising with no discussion of a basic question: Did editorial opinion, when applied to market products rather than political questions, raise different issues from news columns about the same products? On the committee’s analysis, editorial notices and puffs were “part of the stock-in-trade” of advertising agents. The “obvious meaning” of the unfortunate *Reuters* manager was that he could obtain editorial notices, not the contamination of news. Although editorial notices were unsatisfactory, they still had “nothing whatever to do with blending advertisements with...news services.” *Reuters* “happily stands acquitted.”<sup>194</sup> The distinction did not address the structural porousness at *Reuters*, nor did it resolve the “unsatisfactory” ambiguity of editorial opinion, nor did

191. *NSC* September 1908, 9; see also *NSC* July 1914, 10 (“censorship of ‘honest advertisers’ is an alarming eventuality”).

192. *NSC* January 1907, 10–11.

193. This side of the story is beyond the scope of this article. The Newspaper Society was following the processes closely. It was not happy with the concentration of the industry, but endorsed the broader vision of functional separations.

194. *NSC* December 1913, 7.



it explain the distinction of news. After years of dancing around these questions, the representative body of the Newspaper Society well knew that an unstable balance of powers was hinged on tinkering, gently and confidentially, with fine lines, while retaining bombastic commitments to clear distinctions as advertisements—or headlines—for the rest of the press.

### **An Open Question**

Newspapers’ renegotiation of the terms imposed by the midcentury campaign involved a host of normative investments in policies, organizational structures, employment, and contractual relations; debates about recommendations and divergences from them were shared within the newspaper trade and beyond it. Although the ideals embedded in these investments were often honored in the breach, their power should not be underestimated: they spawned a particular vision of advertising as an informational category, but one that was of a lesser order than news. By World War I, the vision was familiar enough to resonate as common sense. The varied modes of defying distinctions between advertisements and news, and responding to defiance, all articulated the inferiority of advertising vis-a-vis news, and on those terms maintained a system of publication that drew profit and enjoyed social legitimacy.

The framing of the relationship of advertising to news, both powerful and precarious, destined the following centuries to a repetition of the same issues. In the early 1980s, for example, James Curran could complain that “the whole question of advertising influence on the media is authoritatively judged to be closed.” He worked hard to recall once more the history of newspapers, and show that advertisers’ preferences continued to direct journalism, and carried over to new communication media.<sup>195</sup> And now, a spate of literature once again seeks to reveal the same challenge. In a recent book, James Williams addresses the danger to democratic well-being posed by current communication media, and argues: “Many of the most widely used platforms, such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, are at core advertising companies.” Williams argues that current conditions are a break with the past, which was characterized by information scarcity; in that past, he argues, the media *was* primarily about information delivery, and advertising was not its core; advertising had only become a problem of persuasion and had overtaken media in the age of information abundance, late into the twentieth century. Yet, these conditions were present once the newspaper press turned to market expansion. Readers of the decades

195. Curran, “The Impact of Advertising on the British Mass Media.”

considered here would be surprised to learn that they were not experiencing information abundance, not only in comparative historical terms, but also in the functional terms that Williams sets: how much can one process? And a late Victorian could easily identify with the sense of predicament put thus: “it seemed that *everything* was now becoming an ad.”<sup>196</sup> There is no need to deny change; the twenty-first century may well be a qualitatively and quantitatively distinctive challenge, with unprecedented quantities of information burdening readers’ capacities of perception and computational abilities to harness psychological research and operate feedback systems that monitor advertising effectiveness, and Williams is fully justified in addressing it. But it is important to see that the conditions of possibility for current challenges were put in place in the past through the processes recounted in this article.

To argue, as Williams does, that “[a]s a media dynamic, advertising has historically been an exception to the rule of information delivery in a given medium. It’s the newspaper ads, but not the articles. . .,” and that even so, advertisements provided useful information for making purchasing decisions, is not to state simple historical facts.<sup>197</sup> Rather, the argument reflects the success of the historical process of conceptualization recounted in this article. That process first organized the evaluation of advertising in terms of information, leaving persuasion aside, and so supported advertising’s expansion with the free market press; then, as doubts arose about the meaning of news in a commercialized press, advertising was labelled inferior and biased in relation to news. The process fostered a continual reliance on advertising together with a categorically critical consciousness toward it, which keeps emerging with media developments. Yet, we might want to question whether such consciousness has not been ultimately counter-productive—indeed part of the problem—for hopes of an independent press: it has kept up an ideal of news as unbiased information by way of comparison with advertising as the lesser order, while burying the troubled assumptions that underlay the hierarchy. Dealing with categories in this manner has deflected attention from the more fundamental question; namely, the substantive terms on which commercial communication media could be expected to enhance democratic lives.

196. James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 29–30, 33.

197. Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 30.